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### **"It Got the Ball Rolling": A Qualitative Exploration of Counseling Students' Small Group Experiences during Group Work Training**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Brittany Lynn Pollard entitled "'It Got the Ball Rolling": A Qualitative Exploration of Counseling Students' Small Group Experiences during Group Work Training." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Counselor Education.

Joel F. Diambra, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Shawn L. Spurgeon, Victor W. Barr, Ralph G. Brockett

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

“It Got the Ball Rolling”: A Qualitative Exploration of Counseling Students’ Small Group  
Experiences during Group Work Training

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Brittany Lynn Pollard  
August 2015

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my inspirational fiancé, my supportive parents, and my patient and dedicated dissertation Chair and mentor.

Tom Kosidowski, your unwavering love and support throughout this process have been invaluable to me, and I am so grateful to have you as my partner on this life journey. Thank you for putting up with the laughter, the tears, the frustration, the triumphs, the tribulations, and the crazy schedule that have characterized my life as a graduate student throughout these last few years! Making you proud means the world to me and I could not have accomplished this major life goal without you by my side every step of the way. I so look forward to the new adventure on which we are about to embark and I can't wait to see what the future has in store for our life together. I love you and thank God for you everyday, my sweetest friend.

Mom and Dad, Nancy Burkitt and Lanny Pollard, I have a lifetime of gratitude to express and only a paragraph in which to try to do it justice. Thank you for 30 years of consistent support and for always challenging me to strive for the best and take advantage of every opportunity. Mom, you've modeled for me what it means to be selfless and authentic in my interactions with others, and I can only hope to become a strong, amazing woman like you. You inspire me everyday. Dad, you've instilled in me a passion for helping others and a genuine love for life and all that it has to offer. Your near-daily reminders to me to "have faith" have carried me through this journey and reminded me on many occasions how incredibly blessed I am. I love you both more than words could say and hope I have made you proud.

Dr. Joel Diambra, where do I even begin? You've gotten the ball rolling for me in so many ways, particularly with regard to my academic endeavors, my professional journey, and, most importantly, my belief in myself. *Thank you* for the many, many conversations shared in

your office these last three years – I treasure our relationship more than you know and hope that I can be to others even half the educator, mentor, and friend you are to me. I look forward to maintaining our relationship as I move on to new adventures and trust that you will be an ever-present part of my continued journey. I could never thank you enough for all you have done for me and I hope you recognize how very instrumental you've been to my success. Thank you.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank God for the many blessings He has bestowed upon me and give Him all the credit for my achievements to date, as well as those to come. Never has my faith in being able to move mountains been so strong. I am deeply grateful and have been truly humbled by this experience.

There is simply no way I could account for every individual who has impacted my life throughout this journey, but I trust that those reading this know how special they are to me. Thank you to the friends, mentors, and colleagues who have supported me, motivated me, encouraged me, challenged me, pushed me, and celebrated with me along the way. I truly would not be here without each and every one of you.

I want to give a special thank you to my dissertation committee. Dr. Joel Diambra, I have no doubt in my mind that I would not have survived this experience without you as my Chair... And I promise that I will never, ever put you through the kind of stress we endured together again! Dr. Shawn Spurgeon, thank you a million times for your unwavering calmness, consistent encouragement, and our many shared laughs. You are a true role model for students... I will always remember that as I cancelled other doctoral program interviews after being accepted at UT, I heard over and over from other program coordinators how “lucky” and “fortunate” I would be to get to work with you. How right they were – I guess when you’re a giant in the field, you “look big” to everyone – not just Dr. D. ☺ Dr. Victor Barr, thank you for your service and your kindness, and for the insightful questions you asked to help guide and focus my research. You have been a pleasure to get to know and I appreciate your valuable input along the way. Dr. Ralph Brockett, thank you for your gentle feedback, and your genuine concern for my well-being as a student, a researcher, and a person. I have so enjoyed developing a relationship with you

and have appreciated your feedback on my work. I could not have asked for a better dissertation committee and I look forward to putting to use all that I have learned from the four of you.

Another major thank you to my UT Counselor Ed. family, including other faculty members, colleagues, and friends. I wish I could list each of you and what you've meant to me, but I am quickly running out of space. Adam Stephens, I could not have asked for a better best friend to come alongside me in this journey. We are truly kindred spirits and I look forward to seeing what we will both do in this field, as well as to our continuing shared perspective about every step of the journey. Tiffany Brooks, thank you for keeping me on my toes by dishing it back to me consistently and for reminding me that it is possible to do it all – you make being Superwoman look easy and inspire me on a daily basis. Lauren Bussey, thank you simply for your sweetness and encouragement. You have such a good heart and such a positive, genuine glow about you – you will make such a valuable contribution to the lives of your students and colleagues.

Finally, thank you to all who have made Knoxville home for me and who have become so much more than friends. To those of you who have been my students at some point, thank you for putting up with me as I learned to be an educator, thank you for inspiring me and challenging me along the way, and thank you for making me truly love this work that I have chosen. Whether you have played a big or small role in my life, please know that you matter to me and that I am eternally grateful from the very bottom of my heart.

## Abstract

Because the counseling profession often involves responsibilities associated with providing both individual and group-based client services, it is important that counselors-in-training are instructed in ways that prepare them to be effective in facilitating both therapeutic modalities. Researchers noted that group therapy constitutes an equally effective, if not at times more effective, approach to treating a range of client issues (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Ward, 2004; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The ways in which counseling students are currently trained in group work frequently involve experiential methods (Guth & McDonnell, 2004), one of which is the increasingly popular requirement of small group participation (Furr & Barret, 2000; Lennie, 2007). Although CACREP (2009) currently requires that students engage in 10 hours of group membership over the course of one semester, little mention is made of requiring students to engage in group facilitation practice. As such, it is currently unclear in the literature how required experiential small groups prepare counseling students as future group facilitators. To address this gap in the literature, this study used a content analysis approach to analyze qualitative interviews with seven counseling graduates who participated in experiential small groups as part of their Group Dynamics and Methods course. Using Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory as a lens to examine transcribed interviews, five themes emerged, including: "Expectations", "The Emotional Experience", "The Learning Process", "Preparation", and "Missing Pieces". I discuss these findings and detail their key aspects in relation to both counselor education and existing literature. I also identify implications for counselor educators and accreditation bodies, and provide recommendations for future research.

*Keywords:* group work, counselors-in-training, experiential learning, CACREP, content analysis



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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Chapter Introduction**

Counselors perform a number of clinical duties in their professional roles, including, but not limited to, providing a myriad of individual therapeutic services and facilitating various types of clinical groups (Corey, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

As such, counselor educators are tasked with equipping counselors-in-training with both the skills necessary for effective individual-level counseling and the skills specifically associated with preparing for, establishing, developing, and maintaining effective therapeutic groups.

Researchers detailed many different teaching methods for counselor educators to consider in their training of future counselors, including didactic lecture, discussion-based activities, testing, reading and writing assignments, observation, supervision, and experiential techniques (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Sangganjanavanich & Lenz, 2012; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Though counselor education curriculum routinely incorporates many of these varying activities, the use of experiential learning methods has become an increasingly popular option for training students to provide both individual and group counseling services to diverse populations (Arthur & Achenbach, 2002; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). One widespread instructional approach that relies frequently on the use of experiential methods is constructivism, by which students are primarily responsible for their own learning and viewed as the ultimate constructors of knowledge (King, 1993).

As counselor educators have taken on an increasingly constructivist approach throughout the years (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011), the training of counselors has become saturated with the inclusion of real-world training experiences and simulations designed to help students prepare

for the challenges of the profession. Researchers routinely cite experience itself as significantly impacting the development of cognitive complexity and fostering within counseling students the skills necessary to perform as clinical professionals (Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956; Granello, 2010). Existing literature emphasizes experiential techniques as especially valuable strategies for training counseling students on group work and all of its unique nuances (Anderson & Price, 2001; Granello, 2000; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Osborn, Daninhirsch, & Page, 2003; Shumaker, Ortiz, & Brenninkmeyer, 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). In fact, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP, 2009) requires as part of its group work standard that master's-level counseling students engage in "...direct experiences... as group members in a small group activity, approved by the program, for a minimum of 10 clock hours over the course of one academic term" (p. 12). CACREP (2009) also requires, albeit vaguely, that counseling students engage in "...studies that provide both theoretical and experiential understandings..." (p. 12) of group-related constructs. Though CACREP (2009) does not specify the nature of these requisite small groups or experiential understandings, nor make any mention of providing group leadership versus group membership experience in particular, it is evident that group work is among the core elements considered essential in training future practitioners. The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2000) details its own recommendations for the training of counseling professionals interested in developing a group work specialization. I describe these guidelines in Chapter Two.

The rest of this chapter introduces the reader to historical and current research on counselor education, particularly as it pertains to group-specific training methods. After detailing the theory that frames the present study, as well as my use of content analysis to

analyze and interpret collected data, I describe the associated problem and purpose and present my research question. I then define several related key terms for the reader and provide a brief overview of this study's limitations, followed by a description of my personal interest in the training of counseling students as it pertains to group work. Finally, I describe the organization of this dissertation.

### **Training of Counseling Students as Future Group Facilitators**

Although the art of counseling any individual requires basic skills such as attending, paraphrasing, reflecting, and summarizing (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2013), the skills necessary for effective group counseling require training which targets skills associated with the facilitation of multiple individual experiences within one common setting (Bacha & Rose, 2007; Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The group facilitator is tasked not only with preparing for and establishing a group's framework, but also with helping group members to navigate both individually and collectively through a series of stages as the group develops and works toward achieving its commonly expressed goals (Gladding, 2012; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Although researchers agree that group facilitation skills are essential for professional counselors to possess, little group work training in counselor education focuses specifically on the hands-on development of leadership skills. Rather, much of the literature highlights the value of experiential group *membership* for counselors-in-training, citing personal growth, increased self-awareness, a heightened understanding of group dynamics, and empathy for future group clients among the benefits of participating in a small group as part of formal training (Ieva, Ohrt, Swank, & Young, 2009; Laux, Smirnoff, Ritchie, & Cochrane, 2007; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Though leadership skills sometimes manifest themselves in the wake of the lessons described above (Yalom & Leszcz,

2005), the direct focus within group work training tends to center around the experiences students have as *members* rather than direct experience as *leaders*.

Though experiential methods used in the group training of counseling students range from role-play and occasional service learning opportunities (Corey, 2015; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), to modeling and in-class simulations (Osborn et al., 2003), one of the more in-depth and commonly used approaches is to require students to participate in small groups throughout the duration of the semester in which they are enrolled in group-focused courses (Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Young, Reysen, Eskridge, & Ohrt, 2013). To provide this membership experience, many counseling programs have developed small group opportunities at the behest of bodies such as CACREP (2009) and the ASGW (2000). Although the foci of these small groups vary by program and range from personal growth and self-awareness to interpersonal exploration and identity development, (Gold, Kivlighan, & Patton; 2013; Laux et al., 2007; Payne, 2001; Rowell & Benshoff, 2008), the general goal remains the same – to experientially introduce counselors-in-training to the climate of group dynamics. In conclusion, though many existing studies describe experiential groups in detail and highlight the ways in which students are able to witness group dynamics and methods in action, few actually explore *how* these experiential requirements influence students' learning processes and whether or not these experiences contribute to their overall development as group *facilitators*. The following section introduces readers to Kolb's (1984) Experiential



Learning Theory (ELT), a framework from which many modern experiential learning methods have evolved and one that constitutes the theoretical lens used in this study.

### **Theoretical Framework: Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory**

Incorporating the work of historical scholars and practitioners including Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, Jung, Freire, and Rogers, Kolb's (1984) ELT posits that learning is a process of experiencing one's own world and repeatedly engaging with and adapting to one's environment, thereby creating knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Closely aligned with the constructivist approach that has become increasingly popular in counselor education, ELT encourages learners to develop knowledge and grasp concepts by engaging experientially with the world and other individuals around them (Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) described a spiral in which learners cycle constantly through processes of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting, using experiences and their related meanings to construct knowledge about the world at large, as well as any given lesson at hand.

In his developmental model associated with ELT, Kolb (1984) described three distinct stages of cognitive development, labeling them: acquisition, specialization, and integration. The counseling graduates who participated in this study resided in the specialization stage at the time of their group work training, whereby "...social, educational, and organizational socialization forces shape the development of a particular, specialized learning style..." (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 195). Their experiences, then, in the required small groups associated with their Group Dynamics and Methods course, shaped their understanding of counseling group work. The goals of this study are to further explore *how* this shaping occurred and what influence the small group experience had on participants' learning of group *facilitation* in particular.

In describing the merits of Kolb's (1984) ELT, Chan (2012) noted, "By participating in real-life activities, students are able to efficiently transform the knowledge learnt from the classroom and textbooks into their understanding" (p. 405). As such, this study utilized qualitative interview and content analysis methods to explore this transformation as it occurred for counseling students through experiential small group participation as a requirement of their graduate-level Group Dynamics and Methods course. ELT served as the theoretical lens for analyzing participant responses and provided a foundation for interpreting both the purpose and influence of experiential small group elements on the development of counselors-in-training as group facilitators.

### **Experiential Learning and Group Training Research Methods**

The methods historically used to explore both experiential learning within counselor education and the ways in which counselors-in-training are instructed on group facilitation have been primarily quantitative or expository in nature and sought generally to describe and/or clarify whether or not particular elements of the group membership experience contributed to students' overall understanding of group processes (Anderson & Price, 2001; Shumaker et al., 2011; Rowell & Benshoff, 2008; Young et al., 2013). Though these studies provided counselor educators with valuable insight into the efficacy of required experiential groups, they often failed to capture students' unique perspectives on how these experiences actually influenced their learning processes, particularly as group facilitators-in-training. Certainly, these studies lend credence to the fact that experiential groups are a useful tool in counselor education, particularly as it pertains to group work, however, many studies lacked in-depth exploration of *how* these experiences contributed to the development of these students as future group *leaders*.

The present study sought to explore deeper concepts related to the ways in which experiential small group requirements influence the learning processes for counselors-in-training, as well as whether or not any influence is limited primarily to their development as group members, or also extends to their development as group facilitators. Although group membership is established as a valuable means of helping students to grasp the concepts of group dynamics and methods, as well as to develop empathy for future clients (Anderson & Price, 2001; Ieva, et al., 2009; Laux, Smirnoff, Ritchie, & Cochrane, 2007; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), it is unclear whether or not membership contributes to the efficacy of counselors as group leaders. Given that group facilitation frequently constitutes a significant role of many counseling professionals, it is important to further examine the leadership training received during graduate school.

One widely used method for qualitatively exploring students' training experiences involves interviewing participants, transcribing the data collected, and analyzing transcribed content for emergent themes. Researchers commonly know this method as content analysis. Although content analysis can also be conducted quantitatively (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Merriam, 2009), it is primarily utilized in qualitative inquiry (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Elo, Kaariainen, Kanste, Polkki, Utriainen, & Kyngas, 2014) as a way of "capturing relevant characteristics" (Merriam, 2009, p. 205) of any given document and categorizing them so as to highlight the commonalities and discrepancies that one finds upon qualitatively exploring any phenomenon. Kondracki, Wellman, and Amundson (2002) noted that content analysis can be utilized to "develop objective inferences" (p. 224), which is precisely what this study aims to do with regard to the usefulness and influence of experiential small groups on students' development as future group facilitators in particular. As such, I used a content analysis

methodology in conjunction with Kolb's (1984) ELT in this study to analyze and interpret the transcribed interview responses of seven counseling graduates who had participated in required experiential small groups as a part of their academic training on group work. Because the nature of experiential small group influence exists as relatively uncharted territory in the literature, I hoped to provide counselor educators and relevant program accreditation bodies with student-voiced insight into this phenomenon.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Group work constitutes an important element of the services provided by counselors and therefore constitutes a critical element of the training experience (Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Although researchers have established the need for counselor training in group work and the efficacy of utilizing experiential learning methods in the counseling classroom (Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010), few studies have qualitatively explored students' experiences of required group engagement in various formats. In particular, further research is needed on the nature of the influence that experiential methods have on students' learning processes, including as group observers, participants, and, as this study highlighted, future group facilitators. Although counselor educators agree that required experiences are helpful for counselors-in-training in developing an overall understanding of group work, little agreement exists regarding the nature of these requirements and how they are best implemented in counseling programs (Anderson & Price, 2001; Osborn et al., 2003). This study attempted to fill this gap by exploring the perspectives of recent counseling graduates on required small group training experiences and the ways in which experiential methods influenced their learning of group dynamics and methods as future group facilitators.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of counselors who participated in experiential small groups required as part of a one-semester graduate-level Group Dynamics and Methods course during their academic training. Using content analysis and a theoretical framework of experiential learning, the present write-up describes participants' small group experiences and related learning processes in their own words, and highlights the themes that emerged from their responses to both pre-determined and spontaneous interview questions. By analyzing interview data for inherent themes related to participants' engagement in required small group experiences, I hope this study provides valuable insight for counselor educators and program accreditation bodies in designing effective group work training methods for future counselors.

### **Significance of the Study**

CACREP (2013) estimated in its recent position statement on licensure portability that more than 10,000 counseling students graduate from accredited programs annually, indicating the prevalence of the discipline and, inherently, the necessity of training students to develop skills related to both individual and group work. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) predicted a highly favorable job outlook for both professional school and mental health counselors between 2012 and 2022, with the expected growth of the school counseling profession situated alongside the national average of 12 percent, and the mental health sector expected to grow at a much quicker rate of 29 percent. Given that counseling constitutes a growing profession and researchers have established group work as a particularly effective therapeutic tool (Corey, 2015, Gladding, 2012, Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), it is critical that counselor educators and national accrediting bodies consider and implement training strategies

that prepare counseling students to be successful as future group facilitators. As the profession continues to develop and grow, current training guidelines must be routinely evaluated and revised to continue meeting the needs of counseling students, new professionals, and, ultimately, the clients with whom they work. In an attempt to encourage these necessary procedures, this study explored the influence of required small group experiences on the training of former counseling students as future group facilitators.

### **Research Question**

In trying to build upon and contribute to existing literature, this study sought to answer the following research question: How do counseling students experience small group participation required as part of their academic training on group work?

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Counselors-in-Training**

“Counselors-in-training” is a term used throughout this study to refer to counseling graduate students formerly enrolled in either the clinical mental health or school counseling master’s-level program at the public southeastern university from which participants were drawn. The term is used interchangeably throughout this dissertation with “counseling students.” All participants described in this study as “counselors-in-training” were students at the time of their enrollment in the Group Dynamics and Methods course and its related experiential small groups, and have since matriculated. For the purposes of this study, participants were asked to reflect specifically on their student training experiences within the small group setting.

#### **Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning is an andragogical method described fairly simply in the literature. Yardley, Teunissen, and Dornan (2012) defined experiential learning as “constructing knowledge

and meaning from real-life experience” (p. 161), while Chan (2012) simplified the definition even further, describing it as “learning by actual experience” (p. 405). Based on Kolb’s (1984) ELT, where he described learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 41), the term “experiential learning” refers in this study to the small group participation required of counselors-in-training at the university from which participants were drawn, designed to provide them with real-world application and experience of various group-related concepts discussed in class.

### **Group/Group Work**

Gladding (2012) defined a group as “a collection of two or more individuals who meet face-to-face or virtually in an interactive, interdependent way, with the awareness that each belongs to the group and for the purpose of achieving mutually agreed-on goals” (p. 4). Kottler and Englar-Carlson (2010) defined group work as “the therapeutic process of helping people learn about themselves for the purpose of making constructive behavioral and life changes...” (p. 9) and further characterized it as “a form of chaos in action” (p. xvii). The ASGW (2000) defined group work in its professional training standards as “a broad professional practice involving the application of knowledge and skill in group facilitation to assist an interdependent collection of people to reach their mutual goals which may be intrapersonal, interpersonal, or work-related” (p. 2-3).

By combining these various definitions and extensions that describe both the construct and nature of the terms “group” and “group work” in relevant literature, I use these terms interchangeably throughout this dissertation. The terms “group” and “group work” as they pertain to this study therefore refer to a gathering of people working interdependently to accomplish some sort of common goal(s) as facilitated by a counseling professional. At times,

the terms “group” and “group work” refer to those gatherings in which participants were required to engage as a part of their Group Dynamics and Methods course. In contrast, the terms “group” and “group work” are also sometimes used as descriptors of group-based work functions generally expected of counseling professionals, including the therapeutic types of groups a counselor might be asked to facilitate. The specific use of this terminology is clearly delineated throughout this manuscript.

### **Group Coursework**

“Group coursework” is defined by CACREP’s (2009) most recently implemented set of standards as “studies that provide both theoretical and experiential understandings of group purpose, development, dynamics, theories, methods, skills, and other group approaches in a multicultural society...” (p. 12). I use the same definition for the purposes of this study.

### **Group Dynamics and Methods Course**

“Group Dynamics and Methods course” refers to the course which all study participants completed as a core requirement for both the clinical mental health and school counseling programs at the university where I collected data. This course meets all group coursework standards set forth by CACREP (2009).

### **Group Facilitation/Group Leadership**

I use the terms “Group facilitation” and “Group leadership” interchangeably throughout this dissertation. Gladding (2012) defined facilitating as “done by group leaders, helping open up communication among group members” (p. 406). In the present study, these terms refer to the function of group counselors using clinical skills (e.g., attending, reflecting, confronting, linking) to guide multiple clients through the therapeutic process in any counseling group setting.



### **Delimitations**

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, I interviewed and analyzed the responses of seven participants who had successfully completed a semester-long course in Group Dynamics and Methods and subsequently graduated from their respective counseling programs. The course constitutes one required element of two CACREP-accredited master's-level programs in mental health and school counseling at a large, public university in the southeastern region of the United States. These interviews focused only on one small aspect of the course experiences of these counseling graduates and represented a very small sample taken from the large population of students and professional counselors who enrolled in the same course in years past. This study did not distinguish among students based upon previous group experiences, whether as group observer, member, or facilitator.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations present in this study and detailed in full in Chapter Three. Inherent in any qualitative study is an inability to generalize its results to a population larger than its own small collection of participants (Creswell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2012), although Rossman and Rallis (2012) noted that “what is learned in one study can still be useful for other settings” (p. 64). The participants in this study completed a Group Dynamics and Methods course within the same graduate-level counseling program at the same large, public, southeastern institution. Therefore, the data gathered are representative only of the experiences of these particular individuals and cannot be generalized to a broader population.

Another natural limitation of qualitative research is the fact that the researcher and his/her biases regarding any given topic are impossible to eliminate from the research process (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Creswell (2013) described this phenomenon, writing, “Researchers have a

personal history that situates them as inquirers” (p. 51). Although I took specific measures (detailed in Chapter Three) to identify and manage my own personal biases, as well as to minimize their effect on the research process, the fact remains that my own life experiences and worldview influenced the ways in which I made meaning of participants’ experiences as described.

Another limitation in conducting this study arose from the sheer volume of data collected and transcribed for analysis. Several authors noted the challenges inherent in transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting the large amounts of data generally managed by qualitative researchers (Anderson, 2010; Kondracki et al., 2002). Dedicating the amount of effort necessary for thorough analysis of data collected required a great time commitment and it is important to recognize and acknowledge the impossibility of fully capturing every possible nuance of each participant interview. As such, the findings of this study reflect only those themes which I was able to capture, explore, and describe in a way that felt justified and appropriately representative of experiences communicated during interview sessions.

Finally, limitations also exist within the content analysis approach. Elo et al. (2014) described these challenges particularly as they relate to establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study and its data. It is critical that researchers using content analysis provide full disclosure of efforts taken to maintain trustworthiness during both data collection and subsequent analysis. I describe my efforts to establish both credibility and trustworthiness in further detail in Chapter Three.

### **Researcher Interest**

My interest in the topic of this dissertation stems from my clinical experiences related to group work, as well as my academic experiences, both as a student and a beginning counselor

educator. Group work has long been a clinical passion of mine and I have witnessed firsthand as a group facilitator the potential benefits and room for development that a group setting can offer to clients willing to engage in group processes and the vulnerability required to expose oneself to one's peers in the context of mental health or psychosocial issues.

As a counselor- and counselor educator-in-training, I thoroughly enjoyed my own group course experiences, although as I discovered during the bracketing process, I felt at times as though they were lacking. Throughout my doctoral program, I have both discovered and continuously explored my passion for group work through assignment-based research. As a counselor educator, I find myself fascinated by the group processes which occur both in and out of the classroom and the ways in which master's-level students engage in making sense of where group work fits into the spectrum of clinical mental health and/or school counseling services that one is trained to provide. As a qualitative researcher, it is the nature of these experiences which interests me and I hope to build a research agenda which deeply explores these experiences and attempts to better understand *if*, *how*, and *why* current instructional methods for group counseling are effective for counselors-in-training. Additionally, it is my goal to examine how we, as counselor educators, might consider improving upon existing training methods and better prepare students to exist not only as group members in every facet of life, but also as professional clinical group facilitators.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five distinct chapters. This first chapter provides the reader with an introduction to the topic of clinical group work and summarizes the importance of exploring the nuances of group training for counseling students. Chapter Two details and synthesizes literature relevant to group work within the counseling profession, the preparation of counselors-in-training as group facilitators, and the use of experiential learning methods within counselor education. Chapter

Three describes the methods used to conduct this study and the ways in which data were both collected and analyzed, while Chapter Four presents analyzed results and attempts to make sense of the data collected. Finally, in Chapter Five, I discuss the implications of this study's results and provide recommendations for future research on related topics.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter described the problem and purpose at the focus of this study and the theoretical framework that provided the lens for analyzing data collected. I presented my primary research question and introduced readers to the key terms and definitions used throughout the duration of this dissertation. Additionally, this chapter provided a brief description of the limitations and delimitations inherent in this study, as well as detailed my personal interest in exploring the experiential learning methods utilized in training graduate-level counseling students as future group facilitators. Finally, this chapter offered readers an idea of how this dissertation is organized and allowed them to envision what lies ahead in subsequent chapters. The next chapter provides an in-depth examination of group work and counselor training literature, beginning with the history of group work as a clinical approach.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

### **Chapter Introduction**

Chapter Two provides a thorough review of literature focused on group work in counseling, the training of counseling students (particularly as group facilitators), and the use of experiential learning methods in counselor education. This chapter begins by reviewing the history and value of group work within counseling and provides an overview of related counselor training. Following the introduction of these foundational topics, Chapter Two describes the education of counseling students in both core curricular areas and in group work, including an overview of training models and methods currently used by counselor educators to facilitate student learning. Finally, this chapter details the use of Kolb's (1984) ELT within counselor education and explores existing research on its effectiveness in training counseling students as group facilitators in particular.

### **Group Work**

As the present study focuses on the training of counseling students as it relates particularly to the facilitation of group work, this section describes the historical presence of group work in counseling and provides an introduction to relevant research. First, I detail the history and value of group work in counseling practice. Then, I summarize existing research regarding the effectiveness of using group work as a therapeutic tool for working with a wide range of clients.

### **History of Group Work in Counseling**

Within the realm of counseling practice exists a number of varying types of groups which have historically proven helpful to individuals seeking information and/or help with a particular matter (ASGW, 2014; Corey, 2015; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Gladding, 2012; Yalom &

Leszcz, 2005). Although various forms of group work existed long before its establishment as a therapeutic practice in the mid-1900s (Barlow, Fuhrman, & Burlingame, 2004; Gladding, 2012), Gladding (2012) noted that large formal groups became effective settings for the dissemination of essential information to group members in the early 1900s. He described the emergence of group development as a multi-disciplinary endeavor and a “dynamic movement” (p. 381), drawing contributions from several human services arenas. In 1905, Joseph Hershey Pratt organized what is widely recognized as the first psychotherapy group for tuberculosis patients at a Boston area hospital, and is cited as one of the first researchers to write about the importance of group dynamics and processes (Gladding, 2012).

As the notion and practice of group work continued to expand alongside the helping fields over the next several decades, group therapy became increasingly integrated into counseling practice in particular (Gladding, 2012; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Researchers (Barlow et al., 2004; Gladding, 2012) highlighted the professional contributions of Alfred Adler, Jacob Moreno, and Trigant Burrows to the development of psychotherapeutic group techniques throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and noted the research focus on small group interactions and influence that emerged during this same period. The 1930s proved to be a particularly significant decade for further group work exploration and development, given the establishment of the first therapeutic treatment and self-help groups, as well as the increased presence of guidance groups within the public school domain (Gladding, 2012). It was during this time that the terms “group therapy”, “group analysis”, and “group counseling” were first coined, providing the foundation for what has today become a commonly utilized forum for counseling practice. Barlow et al. (2004) noted the significance of these advances in terminology, writing that once the practice was named, it could be properly further explored.

Hare (2010) cited the 1940s as the beginning stage of what we now consider modern group work, with Gladding (2012) characterizing this period with the establishment of group-based organizations and the emergence of group-oriented theory. During this period, Kurt Lewin invested his time and energy into promoting the significance of group dynamics and the idea that interactions between individuals and their environment were also of particular importance and should be researched. In addition, Lewin introduced the idea that a group is a system which functions as both "...different from and greater than the parts that comprise it" (Gladding, 2012, p. 385). Lewin's work set the stage for counseling practitioners, theorists, and researchers to come, including Samuel Slavson, Fritz Perls, and Carl Rogers (Gladding, 2012).

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, researchers and practitioners further explored the intricacies of group dynamics and the provision and efficacy of group-based counseling services. Many researchers (Barlow et al., 2004; Gladding, 2012) cited the 1970s as a particular time of growth for group-oriented research, and the establishment of related professional organizations such as the ASGW which still serve as guiding bodies for group practice today. The 1980s and 1990s saw the introduction of group-related ethical standards for counseling practitioners and the continuing exploration of groups as systems, as well as the establishment of research journals dedicated to the study of group processes and dynamics (Gladding, 2012). Group work was integrated into a variety of specialized counseling practices and the use of support groups and self-help groups became increasingly popularized. In recent years, group-based strategies have become increasingly prominent in the helping professions, with training and education for counseling students growing more sophisticated alongside methods for implementation and practice (Corey, 2015; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Gladding, 2012).

With its extensive historical presence in the field of counseling, group work has become a widely investigated, utilized, and respected therapeutic tool among practitioners, educators, and researchers alike (Corey, 2015; Gladding 2012). CACREP (2009) lists group work among its eight core content areas on which counseling students must be trained and many counselors have supported the establishment of group work as its own specialized subset of counseling practice in general (ASGW, 2014). The following section continues the exploration of group work within counseling by describing its significance and value as a therapeutic tool.

### **The Significance of Group Work in Counseling**

In outlining the development of group work throughout time, it is important to examine its increasing popularity (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012) and the value it offers to clients as engaged group members. First and foremost is the fact that groups are ever-present construct in clients' daily lives and represent a framework under which therapy can be flexibly provided to many clients at one time (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012). Not only does group work allow individual members to reflect on personal experiences and work on singular issues; it also allows members to interact with one another in setting and working toward mutual goals. Group membership is often a reciprocal process for all members involved and provides a forum for fostering both interpersonal and intrapersonal growth (Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

In addition to these benefits, the varying formats associated with modern group work allow for a range of member needs to be both addressed and sufficiently met (Corey, 2015; Gladding; 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010). For example, whereas task-oriented groups may help members to develop skills associated with interaction, goal-setting, and collaboration, psychoeducational groups may facilitate both learning and exploration of attitudes, beliefs, and



perceptions among participants (Gladding, 2012). Additionally, the flexibility of group-based therapy is such that groups can be quite easily facilitated in a number of settings, including, but not limited to: community mental agencies, educational institutions, treatment centers, and medical facilities (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012, Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

In exploring the value of group work within a counseling framework, it is important to also consider the efficacy of group work for clients working to resolve or seek respite from any number of presenting issues. Gladding (2012) and Corey (2015) noted the consistently increasing popularity of research on group counseling efficacy, with several researchers citing group work as at least as effective, if not more so than individual therapy in achieving productive counseling outcomes (Barlow et al., 2004; Burlingame, MacKenzie, & Strauss, 2004; Gladding, 2012; Kivlighan, Coleman, & Anderson, 2000; Stout & Hayes, 2005; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Barlow et al. (2004) described the researched efficacy of group counseling as "...undeniably established..." (p. 4), and Ward (2004) noted that group work has over time developed into a solid standalone treatment method rather than just an accompaniment to necessary individual therapy. Corey (2015) asserted the efficacy of group work most directly, writing that, "One reason the group approach has become so popular is that is frequently more effective than the individual approach" (p. 5).

Finally, in conjunction with the factors outlined above, it is critical for practitioners and counselor educators to maintain an awareness of the value of group work simply as a forum which brings individuals together to support one another in dealing with life's challenges and seeking positive growth (Barlow et al., 2004; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Yalom and Leszcz (2005) described 11 therapeutic factors (instillation of hope, universality, imparting information,

altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis, and existential factors) which characterize therapeutic change and the ultimately effective group experience. Inherent in these factors is a sense of *humanness*, or the idea that group participation facilitates a sense of vulnerability along these eleven lines by way of which group members can develop and sometimes begin to cope and/or heal. Corey (2015) cited several of these therapeutic factors in his description of the value of group work, noting its significance in providing clients with a model for their everyday world in which they will have to face challenges, work through issues, and function both independently and interpersonally.

Although the value of group work and its efficacy as a therapeutic approach are well documented in existing literature, it is important to further investigate how group work effectiveness has historically been determined. Many researchers tout the significance of the group setting for clients seeking education, skill development, treatment, and support, but it is critical for practitioners and educators to understand the basis for and development of widespread confidence in this therapeutic approach. The next section examines numerous studies citing the efficacy associated with the use of group work in counseling.

### **Research on Effectiveness of Group Work and Its Future in Counseling**

Research shows that not only is group work an effective modality in numerous clinical settings, but it is also an approach which has proven efficacious in treating a number of diverse populations (Bernak & Chung, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Goicoechea, Wagner, Yahalom, & Medina, 2014; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Pender & Prichard, 2009). Researchers found that at times, making multicultural adaptations to the group work approach can increase its effectiveness for certain populations (Craig, Austin, & McInroy, 2014; Gladding, 2012; Malott,

Paone, Humphreys, & Martinez, 2010; White & Rayle, 2007). As such, many modern researchers have increasingly focused on effective multicultural adaptations within group work (Conyne, 1998; Craig et al., 2014; Garrett, Garrett, & Brotherton, 2001; White & Rayle, 2007). Examples of this focus include White & Rayle's (2007) study of a school-based small group experience adapted to meet the unique needs of African American male youth, and Malott et al.'s (2010) qualitative exploration of the use of group intervention to facilitate ethnic identity development of Mexican adolescents.

In addition to providing a viable option for working with multicultural clinical populations, group work also provides a helpful supplement and sometimes a complete alternative to more time-consuming and costly individual therapy (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Marques & Formigoni, 2001; Ward, 2004). Many researchers studied the efficacy of individual counseling versus group counseling and found them comparable modes of treatment with regard to results (Marques & Formigoni, 2001; Panas, Caspi, Fournier, & McCarty, 2003; Paranjape, Gordon, & Caine-Bish, 2012; ). Several researchers suggested that although group therapy often held a slight advantage over individual, a combined approach to providing treatment may result in the most effective clinical outcomes (Dickhaut & Arntz, 2014; Echeburua, Sarasua, & Zubizarreta, 2014; Paranjape et al., 2012). Few studies resulted in individual therapy being associated with significantly more positive outcomes (Banks & Banks, 2005; Cabedo, Belloch, Carrio, Larsson, Fernandez-Alvarez, & Garcia, 2010; Gudmundsdottir & Thorne, 2014), although the existence of even these few conflictual findings highlights the need for further investigation. Also suggesting the necessity of continuing research is the fact that although the studies cited here focused on a broad range of clinical issues (depression, Borderline Personality Disorder, eating disorders, anxiety, etc.), the majority examined therapeutic interventions

implemented from a primarily cognitive-behavioral approach. As such, researchers might consider exploring other theoretical orientations as the basis for comparison in future group work studies.

Having established the history, value, and demonstrated efficacy of group work in counseling, Gladding (2012) suggested that it is also important to investigate the potential future of this increasingly widespread treatment approach. Although difficult to predict, researchers suggested that future possibilities may include a heightened variety in group services (Gladding, 2012; Corey, 2015), a continuing move toward empowerment of members to advocate for social justice (Gladding, 2012; Singh, Merchant, Skudrzyk, & Ingene, 2012; Singh & Salazar, 2010), and the modification of group-based treatment approaches to briefer formats which fit the changing demands of managed care (Cornish & Benton, 2001; Piper & Ogrodniczuk, 2004). Research and practice devoted to group work are both likely to continue developing throughout the next several decades, given the wealth of opportunities for further exploration, and the increasing support of dedicated professional organizations, scholarly publications, and credentialed clinicians.

### **Summary of Group Work**

This section provided an overview of the history and future of group work in counseling, as well as an exploration of its value and efficacy as a treatment approach. Having established a solid foundation for understanding group work within the contexts of counseling and related research, the next sections provide a detailed examination of how counselors are trained to engage in both general and specialized clinical practices. We begin with an overview of counselor training as an integrative and developmental process.

## **Counselor Training**

Alongside the actual practice of counseling, the training provided to counseling students has developed significantly over time, although research on the subject is fairly limited (Buser, 2008; Wheeler, 2002). In this section, we explore the complex developmental nature of counselor education, followed by an overview of the ways in which counselors-in-training develop the skills necessary for clinical practice. This sets the foundation for later examining the training and development of counseling students as group facilitators in particular.

### **Counselor Training as a Developmental Process**

According to Gibbons, Cochran, Spurgeon, & Diambra (2013), the effective training of counseling students includes not only the facilitation of professional skill development, but also the fostering of critical personal dispositions. As such, this section incorporates both the personal and professional elements associated with counselors' development of expertise. Although relevant personal characteristics are not heavily emphasized in the most recent CACREP (2009) standards, Gibbons et al. (2013) suggested that, "... the work of counselor educators should contain a humanistic focus, attending to the development of counseling students as persons developing themselves" (p. 6). Counselor education, therefore, frequently operates from a personally oriented, reflective, and developmental perspective and, characterized by a need for effective gatekeeping that may not exist as prominently in unrelated disciplines (Gibbons et al., 2013; Lumadue & Duffey, 1999; Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003; Wheeler, 2002).

Morran, Kurpius, Brack, and Brack (1995) described traditional counselor training as primarily focused on behavioral skills, calling for the integration of cognitive processing into therapeutic response, a call that counselor educators have resoundingly answered. With regard to clinical training, researchers suggested that today's counseling students are educated within

two primary domains: cognitive skills and interpersonal abilities. As researchers have increasingly recognized the need for focusing on the developmental cognitive, personal, interpersonal, and behavioral needs of counselors-in-training, counselor educators have developed several successful training models, including the Skilled Counselor Training Model (SCTM; Little, Packman, Smaby, & Maddux, 2005) and the Counselor Feedback Training Model (CFTM; Swank & McCarthy, 2013). The next section provides a brief comparison of the two.

### **A Comparison of Two Counselor Training Models**

Modern counselor training models focus primarily on skill acquisition and retention, the development of interpersonal abilities, and the intersection between the two. The SCTM provides one example of a cognitively based, skill development model used to facilitate the abilities of counselors-in-training to self-monitor and evaluate their own efficacy as counselors (Little et al., 2005; Urbani, Smith, Maddux, Smaby, Torres-Rivera, & Crews, 2002). As an outgrowth of the Skilled Group Counselor Training Model (SGCTM; Urbani et al., 2002), the SCTM uses a three-stage process to facilitate in counseling trainees the development of self-efficacy through the mastering of related clinical skills (Buser, 2008; Little et al., 2005; Urbani et al., 2002). Little et al. (2005) described the purpose of the SCTM as an integration of the professional and the personal; along with teaching mastery of skill, counselor educators also use this model to facilitate trainee development of relational ability. The three-stage model promotes a structured process of exploration, understanding, and acting, in that order (Little et al., 2005), which not only facilitates trainee skill development and self-evaluation abilities, but also aligns closely with Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956).

Swank and McCarthy (2013) described the CFTM, a more recent developmental approach to counselor training, which asserts the importance of counselor trainees being skilled in both giving and receiving feedback. Much like the SCTM described above, this model can be incorporated early in the training process (the authors suggested including it in a foundational skills course) and integrated throughout the rest of the curriculum (Swank & McCarthy, 2013). Although the CFTM focuses on the development of feedback-related skillsets, it also incorporates personal trainee development surrounding awareness, perception, and openness (Swank & McCarthy, 2013). Additionally, given its grounding in Kolb's (1984) ELT, the CFTM follows a seven-step process that balances didactic instruction with experiential opportunities. Doing so allows counseling students to again move through Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956), from conceptualization and understanding to application and evaluation of learned feedback skills.

The two models described here highlight the tradition of integrative counselor training, which brings together both personal and professional student development. Although the use of such models is well documented in the literature, it is important to explore their efficacy in comparison to a lack of formalized training or training which utilizes dissimilar approaches. The following section details research evaluating the effectiveness of traditional counselor training as described in the literature.

### **Demonstrated Effectiveness of Counselor Training**

CACREP (2009) accreditation standards require that counseling trainees "...demonstrate the professional knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to work in a wide range..." (p. 29) of clinical settings, emphasizing the need for research which explores the efficacy of existing training programs. In his literature review on documented counselor training methods, Buser

(2008) highlighted the modern integrative trend of counselor education described in the previous section. He, along with several other researchers, noted that empirical evidence generally supports the success of this approach in producing comprehensively educated, competent professional counselors (Buser, 2008; Whiston & Coker, 2000). Buser (2008) also noted, however, that although research on the effectiveness of trained counseling professionals versus those without formal graduate education is limited, initial discrepancies in findings do exist. This suggests a need for continued research into the outcomes of clinical services provided by graduate-educated counseling professionals versus lesser-educated paraprofessionals.

Several other researchers also explored the effectiveness of varying counselor education training programs, models, and methods. Crews et al. (2005) described support for both the Skilled Counselor Training (SCT) and Interpersonal Process Recall (IPR) models. In another study, Young and Hagedorn (2012) stressed the effectiveness of providing skill demonstration opportunities for trainees to promote development of performance self-efficacy. Ekong (2006) found trainee support for the use of online training methods, provided several facilitative conditions were met, whereas Aladag, Yaka, and Koc (2014) also found significant backing for the use of instructional technology in counselor training. These studies offered support for Granello's (2000) assertion that many counselor training programs are in need of both curricular updating and the utilization of a wider variety of counselor training methods. Interestingly, Schonrock-Adema, Van der Molen, and van der Zee's (2009) findings demonstrated that microcounseling skills may be as effectively learned via methods of self-instruction as traditional methods facilitated by faculty trainers. Researchers found that reported effectiveness of training also correlated with the use of varied evaluation tools, both formative and summative (Malott, Hall, Sheely-Moore, Krell, & Cardaciotto, 2014; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011).



Several individuals called for the continuing expansion of the body of knowledge related to counselor training (Buser, 2008; Granello, 2000; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011) and researchers are working diligently to answer that call. This section provided a brief overview of existing research on the effectiveness of current models utilized in counselor training, including the SCTM, IPR, online education, and self-directed learning. As it stands, research supports the traditionally integrative model of counselor education which incorporates both elements of professional and personal development (Gibbons et al., 2013). However, further exploration of training effectiveness is needed as both counseling practice and relevant training continue to develop.

### **Summary of Counselor Training**

This section provided an overview of counselor training in general, describing both the personal and professional aspects of counselor development (Buser, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2013) and currently utilized models which support this approach, such as the SCTM (Little et al., 2005; Urbani et al., 2002) and the CFTM (Swank & McCarthy, 2013). After comparing these models, I provided a description of counselor training effectiveness as demonstrated in existing literature and the fact that many researchers called for further exploration of this subject (Buser, 2008; Granello, 2000). The next section transitions from examining counselor training as a whole to further exploring the training of counseling students as group facilitators, which sets the stage for the present study exploring one training method's influence on how counseling students learn about group work.

### **Training Counseling Students in Group Work**

As explained in previous sections, counselor educators train students on a multitude of competencies, used interdependently across the varying realms of counseling practice. In

addition to core skills, however, counselor educators are also tasked with training students in specific, more specialized areas of practice, one of which is the facilitation of group work (ASGW, 2000; CACREP, 2009). Killacky and Hulse-Killacky (2004) asserted that, “Group competency skills are critical for counselors in today’s world” (p. 88) and suggested that counselor educators explore methods for infusing group work training throughout standard counselor education curriculum rather than in one standalone course.

This section examines historical perspectives on the training of counseling students as group facilitators. First, I briefly explore the subject of group work training within counseling, including widely used definitions, field standards, and guidelines as outlined by CACREP (2009) and the ASGW (2000, 2014). Then, I summarize the body of literature which highlights the infusion of CACREP (2009) and ASGW (2000) principles into counselor education curriculum. Finally, this section explores various methods employed by counselor educators in facilitating group work training, including a comparison of existing training models and a thorough review of numerous other curricular strategies available to and utilized by counselor educators.

### **Group Work Training: CACREP Standards**

In beginning our exploration of how counseling students are trained to provide group-based services, it is important to consider how group work training has developed and what relevant topics traditional group-focused curriculum covers. This section introduces the reader to the basic group work requirements of counselor education’s primary accreditation body and to subject matter commonly addressed in group work courses. These topics establish a foundation for further exploring how counselor educators address professional standards, learning outcome guidelines, and required content in the classroom.

As an accrediting body for graduate counselor education programs nationwide, CACREP establishes training standards and learning outcomes for use in designing and implementing content-based curriculum and practice-based student experiences. CACREP (2009) defined the eight common core curricular areas on which counselor education is focused, including: professional orientation and ethical practice, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, helping relationships, group work, assessment, and research and program evaluation. As specified in the most recent standards published by CACREP (2009), group work training for counseling students must include “studies that provide both theoretical and experiential understandings of group purpose, development, dynamics, theories, methods, skills, and other group approaches in a multicultural society” (p. 12). Beyond this definition, CACREP (2009) provides minimal guidelines for counselor educators to use in developing curricular content that provides students with relevant group-based practical experiences.

Instead of detailing ways to engage students in group leadership opportunities, CACREP (2009) focuses its guidelines on engaging counselors-in-training as small group members for 10 hours over the course of a single semester. Though the description of internship requirements includes a clause calling for, “At least 240 clock hours of direct service, including experience leading groups” (CACREP, 2009, p. 15), the standards make no mention of exactly how many hours of group facilitation experience are necessary, nor do they provide any basis for what type of experience is sufficient. This lack of detail is at the crux of the present study, which hopes to explore whether or not the required direct group membership element has any influence on counseling students’ development as group facilitators.

CACREP (2009) is more specific about its standards for group work curriculum, directing counselor educators to engage students in the study of relevant theory, roles, methods, culture, and evaluation. Although these standards again make no specific mention of providing students with opportunities for leadership *experience* (other than those related to internship), they do mandate that students learn *about* approaches to leadership and the characteristics commonly associated with effective group facilitators. A review of the finalized and recently released 2016 CACREP standards revealed no significant changes in the language associated with group work guidelines. Primary revisions related to this common core curricular area included briefer descriptions of required subject matter, and a slight change in the description of related internship requirements. In the CACREP (2009) standards, students are required to engage during internship in “At least 240 clock hours of direct service, including experience leading groups” (p. 15). The updated standards modify this requirement slightly to read that “In addition to the development of individual counseling skills, during *either* the practicum or internship, students must lead or co-lead a counseling or psychoeducational group” (CACREP, 2015, p. 13). Though the reasoning behind this particular revision is unknown, it is interesting to note that CACREP still provides no concrete definition of “group leadership” or what required leadership practice should entail, nor has it added any emphasis to the requirement that trainees experience the role of group facilitator outside of practicum or internship. The language associated with small group participation requirements remains unchanged in the new standards, although several researchers have noted since the implementation of CACREP’s 2009 standards that requiring group participation alone does not provide as valuable a training experience as requiring students to engage in actual leadership practice (Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010). As a means of comparing the two professional bodies which most promote and

regulate group work training, the next section details the guidelines and learning outcomes associated with the ASGW (2000).

### **Group Work Training: ASGW Standards**

The ASGW is a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA) which focuses on training and supporting counselors interested in group work specialization (ASGW, 2014). On the ASGW (2014) website, members describe themselves as “...Counseling Professionals who are interested in and specialize in group work...” and who “...value the creation of community; service to our members, their clients, and the profession; and leadership as a process to facilitate the growth and development of individuals and groups.” In addition to publishing the peer-reviewed *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, the ASGW (2000) provides group counselors and counselor educators with comprehensive professional training standards, guidelines for best practice (Thomas & Pender, 2008), and principles for multicultural and social justice competence in the provision of group work (Singh et al., 2012). As members, researchers, counseling students, professionals, and educators are able to access a number of additional resources, including podcasts, DVDs, and other educational and/or training materials (ASGW, 2014).

The ASGW’s (2000) professional standards defined group work as “A broad professional practice involving the application of knowledge and skill in group facilitation to assist an interdependent collection of people to reach their mutual goals which may be intrapersonal, interpersonal, or work-related,” (p. 2-3). The authors noted that group goals may include performing tasks relevant to a wide range of personal investments, including, but not limited to, work and/or education, personal and/or interpersonal issues, and the remediation of mental and/or emotional disorders (ASGW, 2000). With regard to preparing counseling students and

practitioners for effective group facilitation, the ASGW (2000) also made several recommendations for both core content and advanced specialization training competencies and learning outcomes. Similarly to CACREP (2009), ASGW (2000) guidelines recommended only that trainees engage in 20 hours of observation and participation as *either* a group member or leader.

### **Curricular Infusion of CACREP and ASGW Standards**

As bodies such as CACREP and the ASGW have increasingly standardized the field of group work, counselor educators have worked to ensure that traditional counseling curriculum models are designed to help students meet appropriate objectives and achieve relevant learning outcomes. In order to adhere to the standards and principles set forth by both CACREP (2009) and the ASGW (2000), researchers and counselor educators have developed a number of effective training models and classroom activities which employ a wide range of instructional techniques (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Wilson, Rapin, & Haley-Banez, 2004). Wilson et al. (2004) noted the value of basing group work training on the ASGW's foundational documents in particular, as they describe and provide a basis for the entire field of group work, as well as increase professional recognition and standards for those aspiring to perform effectively as group facilitators. Guth and McDonnell (2004) supported these assertions, calling the establishment of professional field training standards the most noteworthy advancement highlighted in current literature. Although they provide a foundation for current group work training practices, it is worth noting that the ASGW's (2000) 15 year-old standards may be ready for re-examination and revision consideration. The next sections provide an overview of standards-based curricular methods utilized by counselor educators in training counseling students on group work.

## **Curricular Methods Employed by Counselor Educators**

As interest in group work and the training of effective group counselors has grown (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010), researchers and educators have developed a number of models for use in the training of counseling students as both group members and group facilitators. In addition to these models, many counselor educators have incorporated varying strategies into their teaching approaches to enhance student learning (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The following subsections detail several of these models and strategies, providing insight into current group work training practices used both in and out of the classroom.

**A comparison of group facilitation training models.** In their quest to provide counseling trainees with specialized group work training, counselor educators have designed standards-based models to enhance both basic counseling skills and those specific to effective group facilitation. This section provides a brief comparison of two such models within the realm of group work training. Following this comparison, I provide an overview of additional teaching strategies used in training counseling students to provide group-based services.

One model used widely in counselor education, and which spawned the SCTM described in an earlier section is the Skilled Group Counseling Training Model (SGCTM; Smaby, Maddux, Torres-Rivera, & Zimmick, 1999; Urbani et al., 2002; Zimmick, Smaby, & Maddux, 2000). Designed to promote group facilitation and self-assessment skills among counseling trainees, the SGCTM was the first model to integrate group leadership skills systematically into a structured training approach (Smaby et al., 1999). Researchers described the three stages of the SGCTM as learning to facilitate exploration of group problems, developing an understanding of agreed-upon group goals, and helping group members move to action on achieving set goals (Smaby et al.,

1999; Urbani et al., 2002). Smaby et al. (1999) wrote, “For each of the three stages, the model identifies a) a purpose, b) two counseling processes, and c) six counseling skills” (p. 153).

Doing so, the authors noted, helps counselors-in-training to learn cognitive skills (e.g., decision-making), interpersonal skills (e.g., empathy), and behavioral skills (e.g., confronting) (Smaby et al., 1999). In this sense, the group facilitation skills addressed by the SGCTM build on one another and continue the tradition of a developmental, multi-layered approach to counselor education.

Another group-based training framework stemming directly from the standards set forth by the ASGW (2000) is one developed by Guth and McDonnell (2004). The model is designed to address the seven core group-based training competencies outlined by the ASGW (2000), including: Nature and Scope of Practice, Assessment of Group Members, Planning Group Interventions, Implementation of Group Interventions, Leadership and Co-Leadership, Evaluation, and Ethical Practice, Best Practice, and Diversity-Competent Practice. To meet the needs of different learners while addressing these competencies, the authors suggested the developmentally appropriate incorporation of didactic, experiential, and observational activities and assignments during the beginning, middle, and end stages of a group work course for counselors-in-training (Guth & McDonnell, 2004). Reminding counselor educators to keep accreditation and ethical standards in mind, Guth & McDonnell (2004) encouraged trainers to be assertive in seeking out relevant resources to incorporate into group curriculum and to critically examine how chosen activities meet professional guidelines.

In addition to and inherent within the models described in this section are a number of standalone teaching strategies which counselor educators have historically incorporated into varying approaches to group work training. Among these methods are required experiential



small groups (Ieva et al., 2009; Laux et al., 2007; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), the inclusion of role-playing, demonstration, and other experiential activities designed to give trainees some semblance of group leadership (Furr & Barret, 2000; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Killacky & Hulse-Killacky, 2004; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011), and instructor modeling of concepts covered in class (Cohen & DeLois, 2002; Riva & Korinek, 2004). Each of these strategies is detailed briefly in the following subsection.

**Teaching strategies utilized in group work training.** Experiential methods derived from Kolb's (1984) ELT constitute some of the most historically used and continually researched approaches to practice-based disciplines such as counselor education, and are widely utilized in group work training (Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Although the use of Kolb's (1984) theory within counselor education is further detailed in a later section, I review some of the more popular resulting training methods here. Among these methods are the implementation of required small personal development groups, and the incorporation of experiential activities such as role-play and student demonstration activities into didactic curriculum.

Following a revision of CACREP standards to include task and psychoeducational group curriculum in the year 2000, personal development small groups became a widely popular strategy among instructors teaching group courses (Furr & Barret, 2000). Lennie (2007) suggested that requiring student participation in these small groups serves a dual purpose in providing trainees with valuable learning experiences and also encouraging deeper self-reflection and awareness without potentially unethically requesting that students attend personal counseling. Authors widely considered to be experts on group work and related training also asserted the merits of small group participation by counseling trainees, citing the development of

empathy for future clients, a deepened understanding of group processes and dynamics, and the opportunity to explore in-class concepts among its many benefits (Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Although this method of experiential learning has become popular amongst counselor educators teaching group work, some researchers noted that it is not without controversy (Ieva et al., 2009; Laux et al., 2007; Lennie, 2007). Among disagreements over the use of experiential small groups are concerns regarding coercion of student participation (Lennie, 2007), issues related to effective screening practices (Laux et al., 2007), and the ethics associated with small group facilitation frequently engaging instructors and students in problematic dual relationships (Ieva et al., 2009).

In the same spirit of providing trainees with experiential opportunities, many counselor educators have also developed hands-on classroom activities which allow students to engage with course material in a deeper, more meaningful way (Furr & Barret, 2000; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010). One technique described by Furr and Barret (2000) involves counseling trainees leading various group exercises for 20 minutes during each class period of a semester-long group work course. Following these demonstrations, students engage in self-evaluation and their peers spend time critiquing the experience and offering constructive feedback (Furr & Barret, 2000).

Group-oriented role-plays provide another experiential way for counseling students to practice leadership skills and experience membership. Guth & McDonnell (2004) described helpful role-play scenarios which allow trainees to experience working with difficult group members, practicing challenging skills such as cutting off, and engaging in intervention implementation. Several other researchers also cited the benefits of in class role-play activities, including the opportunity for trainees to assume different roles, rehearse related skills and

techniques, engage in creative problem-solving, and consider how to translate knowledge and understanding of role-play activities into their own future group facilitation (Corey, 2015; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010).

Another popular technique used in training counseling students as group facilitators is instructor modeling of concepts discussed in class (Cohen & DeLois, 2002; Riva & Korinek, 2004). Yalom and Leszcz (2005) noted that group members often engage in imitative behavior following the lead of group facilitators, and research shows that trainees frequently engage in the same process with trainers. Riva and Korinek (2004) posited that by incorporating the modeling of and subsequent reflection upon group-specific behaviors, instructors can create a group work training atmosphere with "...the potential to be much more than a way to disseminate information in a traditional manner" (p. 56). One research team even suggested instructor modeling as a strategy for incorporating group skills competency training throughout the entire counselor education curriculum, rather than strictly in required group work courses (Killacky & Hulse-Killacky, 2004). Riva and Korinek (2004) described the nature of vicarious learning associated with modeling, noting that students often learn both consciously and subconsciously from observing trainers, sometimes even when no concrete lesson is intended. They described the power of social influence as a catalyst for student learning and asserted that the inherent power differential between trainer and trainee lends itself to an environment where modeling can be highly impactful (Riva & Korinek, 2004).

The instructional strategies described in this section can provide powerful learning experiences for counseling students endeavoring to learn the nuances of group work. Coupled with or incorporated into the models detailed in an earlier section, group instructors have a number of active and engaging tools at their disposal in providing students with rich learning

experiences. Although CACREP (2009) and ASGW (2000) standards offer minimal specificity with regard to the leadership experience needed for success as professional group facilitators, the strategies described here offer plenty of opportunity for students to engage in leadership roles and activities beyond the confines of basic group membership.

### **Summary of Training Counseling Students in Group Work**

This section reviewed the literature associated with the training of counseling students as group facilitators. A description of relevant CACREP (2009) and ASGW (2000) standards provided the foundation for exploring training guidelines, followed by an overview of how counselor educators incorporate these recommendations into varying curricular activities. Given this established understanding of how group work curriculum is designed within counselor education, the following section details how counseling trainees develop expertise in this specialty area.

#### **Counselors-in-Training: Developing Group Work Expertise**

As counseling trainees progress through their programs of study, they are increasingly expected to demonstrate not only mastery of skill but also general and specialized forms of expertise (Little et al., 2005; Kivlighan & Kivlighan, 2009; Kivlighan & Kivlighan, 2010). As such, it is imperative for the purposes of this study to explore the ways in which students develop and demonstrate said expertise and mastery with regard to group work, particularly in reference to the differences identified between novice and expert group facilitators. The section that follows details numerous studies on the development of expertise on group work within counseling and the progression of students from inexperienced counselors-in-training to capable and effective group facilitators.

### **Group Facilitator Development: Acquiring Mastery and Expertise**

Gladding (2012) wrote that “Leadership and groups are eminently connected” (p. 53), describing group leaders as those who facilitate, share their vision, set goals, motivate others, and effectively achieve unity among group members. Zimmick et al. (2000) noted that proficiency in group counseling is marked by not only knowledge and understanding of group-related concepts, but also the ability to integrate effective skills with relevant theoretical practices. Although this need for integration is emphasized throughout the literature, Conyne, Wilson, Kline, Morran, and Ward (1993) found that Master’s-level counseling graduates were effectively trained in group-based knowledge competencies approximately 85% of the time, while only two percent of surveyed group counselors reported adequate training in the effective application of relevant skills. Recognizing this perceived gap in training begs the question of how counseling students can acquire both mastery of skill and development of expertise with regard to the provision of therapeutic group services (Corey, 2015). Research efforts point to a number of key variations between novice and expert group facilitators (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Kottler, 1994), several of which are described in further detail throughout this section. Exploring these differences helps to identify developmentally appropriate areas of focus for those educators training counseling students as group leaders.

Corey (2015) posited that although being a novice group leader presents its own unique challenges, it also includes a number of inherent benefits, such as unmatched levels of creativity, energy, and desire to make a difference. Several researchers asserted the importance of exploring the differences between novice and expert group facilitators (Kottler, 1994; Kivlighan, Markin, Stahl, & Salahuddin, 2007; Rubel & Kline, 2008), emphasizing that although not always easy to discern, noted differences can help to shape trainers’ developmental goals and related

instruction for trainees (Kivlighan et al., 2007; Rubel & Kline, 2008). Among variations identified in the literature were expert group facilitators' enhanced cognitive processing and decision-making abilities (Kivlighan et al., 2007; Corey, 2015; Rubel & Kline, 2008), heightened skills in utilizing available resources to implement effective interventions (Corey, 2015; Rubel & Kline, 2008), and increased confidence and self-efficacy as group leaders (Gladding, 2012; Ohrt, Robinson, & Hagedorn, 2013; Rubel & Kline, 2008). The following subsections detail each of these variations.

**Cognitive processing and decision-making.** With proper training and time allowed for experiential practice, many researchers suggested that novice trainees can develop into expert group counselors possessing sharpened cognitive skills of processing, responding, and decision-making (Kivlighan et al., 2007; Corey, 2015; Rubel & Kline, 2008). In qualitatively exploring the experiences and perceptions of expert group facilitators, Rubel and Kline (2008) found participants' knowledge and understanding of group as an entity developed significantly over time. Expert group leaders reported that alongside increased knowledge and experience came heightened abilities to incorporate theory and engage in facilitative behaviors that helped to maintain member engagement and foster better attendance (Rubel & Kline, 2008). Additionally, the authors noted, as participants' knowledge of group processes and interactions developed, so did their abilities to conceptualize both individual members and existing group issues and cognitively formulate appropriate responsive actions (Rubel & Kline, 2008). Rubel and Kline (2008) described this cognitive process of group counselors as perceiving, understanding, and formulating.

Corey (2015) supported the assertion that the development of cognitive understanding constitutes a critical element of the transition from group work novice to expert group facilitator,

positing that relevant skills such as decision-making and responding effectively exist alongside trainees on a continuum of mastery. He noted that such cognitive leadership skills are frequently and simultaneously utilized during group facilitation and that the ability to multi-task in the complex environment of a group setting takes both time and practice to develop. Given the interdependence of group-based cognitive tasks, Corey (2015) also suggested that improvement upon one skillset frequently results in the natural sharpening of interrelated skillsets. Finally, both Corey (2015) and Kivlighan and Kivlighan (2009) stressed the necessity of *experience* as a catalyst for the development of cognitive skills as a group facilitator, a concept which will be further explored in the next section.

Kivlighan et al. (2007) offered further support for the developmental research described above, highlighting the role that effective training played in the development of novice counselors' skills associated with cognitive conceptualization and knowledge structures related to group work. As described earlier in this section, the authors supported the idea that group counselors must cognitively develop beyond the stages of knowledge and understanding to be able to practice and apply group work skills as expert facilitators (Kivlighan et al., 2007). As they acquire the ability to do so, Kivlighan et al. (2007) wrote, they are able to cognitively perceive group dynamics in a more complex fashion, by attending to multiple dimensions of the group process simultaneously. These concepts align closely with Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956), which describes the transitions learners make from acquiring knowledge, to conceptualization, and onward to application, synthesis, and evaluation of concepts and/or practices learned.

In addition to developing a strong base for cognitive conceptualization and theoretical understanding, researchers also noted the critical nature of trainees' development with regard to

intervention design and implementation. This area marks the point where group facilitators begin to integrate knowledge and practice effectively as they transition from novice to expert status (Zimmick et al., 2000). The next subsection details research focused on group counselors and their ability to use intervention effectively.

**Interventions.** Although Corey (2015) described a strong therapeutic relationship between a counselor and his/her clients as a necessity, he also asserted that effective and timely intervention is equally critical to producing client progress, again highlighting the intersection of knowledge and application (Zimmick et al., 2000). He detailed many skills necessary for group counselors to effect change, including, but not limited to: listening actively, reflecting, facilitating group interaction, assessing, and modeling, and noted that novice trainees are developmentally less able to perform these functions using effective interventions than are expert practitioners (Corey, 2015). Corey (2015) suggested to counselors-in-training that they focus on acquiring and developing one skill at a time so as to avoid feeling overwhelmed, emphasizing again the importance of practice and experience in developing the ability to integrate skills into successful group interventions.

Rubel and Kline (2008) also wrote about variations in intervention-based abilities between novice and expert group counselors. Having detailed the afore-mentioned cognitive process of perceiving, understanding, and formulating, the authors described expert counselors' abilities to translate thinking and decision-making into intervention design, implementation, and evaluation (Rubel & Kline, 2008). Rubel and Kline (2008) noted the complexity with which experts were able to predict intervention success based on their advanced understanding of group processes and dynamics, as well as to evaluate interventions post-implementation based on group response. The ability of these experts to do so demonstrated their progression to the evaluative



level of Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). The authors described expert participants as still challenged by but excited about group facilitation, noting that the development of self-efficacy over time allowed them to remain excited even in the face of difficult group work (Rubel & Kline, 2008). I detail this notion of self-efficacy and its impact on the transition between novice and expert in the following subsection.

**Self-efficacy.** Bandura and Locke (2003) defined the term "self-efficacy" as "...the core belief that one has the power to produce desired effects..." (p. 87). For counselors, then, self-efficacy refers to a clinician's belief in whether or not he/she can help clients to effect positive change within their own lives. Researchers have noted varying levels of self-efficacy among the most striking differences between novice and expert group facilitators (Gladding, 2012; Ohrt et al., 2013; Rubel & Kline, 2008); a notion which can be considered logical given frequently vast developmental differences in knowledge and ability. Although research on counseling self-efficacy is plentiful, Gladding (2012) noted the limited availability of research dedicated to the self-efficacy development of group counselors in particular. As he reminded professionals that, "Most people are not natural leaders of groups," (Gladding, 2012, p. 74), it is important to examine how counselors-in-training develop self-efficacy regarding their abilities to execute the practical functions of group work successfully.

Ohrt et al. (2013) found that among counselor trainees, participation in either a psychoeducational or a personal growth experiential group resulted in increased self-efficacy related to group facilitation abilities. Lending support to previous assertions that experience constitutes one of the most significant catalysts for learning, the findings of their study suggested that experience also plays a major role in the transition from novice to expert, with regard to belief in one's abilities (Ohrt et al., 2013). Based on their results, the authors suggested that the

experience of observing group dynamics and leadership functions in action may also contribute to self-efficacy around performance of facilitation skills.

Rubel and Kline (2008) also explored variations in self-efficacy between novice and expert group facilitators, finding that experts reported experience as the primary contributor to their heightened senses of effectiveness as group practitioners. In particular, expert participants described the development of trust over time, including "...learning to trust the group process, group members, and themselves" (Rubel & Kline, 2008, p. 145). The authors described yet again the integration of knowledge, understanding, and practice as key to this self-efficacy development, suggesting that counselor educators focus on these dimensions and on encouraging risk-taking in providing group work training to novice students.

Having highlighted three of the major variations researchers found between novice and expert group counselors, as well as the necessity for integrative training approaches, this section concludes with an overview of how counseling students develop cognitive complexity, thereby moving from comprehension to application. The next few paragraphs detail research on cognitive complexity development among group counseling trainees, followed by a summary of their development of group work expertise.

### **Cognitive Complexity Development in Counselors-in-Training as Group Facilitators**

At the time of this literature review, few studies exploring cognitive complexity in relation to group work training existed. Granello and Underfer-Babalis (2004) described cognitive complexity in the context of group work supervision by using Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) as a framework to align proposed interventions with various group stages. Utilizing their model, Granello and Underfer-Babalis (2004) suggested that supervisors could assist trainees in beginning to transition from knowledge and comprehension

all the way through synthesis and evaluation as group facilitators. At the time of their study, Granello and Underfer-Babalis (2004) suggested further investigation of cognitive complexity in relation to group work training, as well as future research which might validate the effectiveness of their proposed model.

By analyzing written reflection assignments, Davison (2014) further explored the cognitive complexity development of Master's-level group counseling students. He found that trainees demonstrated cognitive complexity primarily within the range of knowledge to application, and were generally unable at their level of training to demonstrate cognitive complexity beyond the application level of Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Davison, 2014). Similarly to Granello and Underfer-Babalis (2004), Davison (2014) called for further research into the cognitive complexity of group counseling students, particularly as it relates to the identification and promotion of training strategies which enhance trainees' cognitive complexity development.

### **Summary of Counselors-in-Training: Developing Group Work Expertise**

This section reviewed existing literature associated with how counselors-in-training develop group work expertise. By exploring significant variations between novice and expert group facilitators as described in the literature, such as cognitive processing, intervention design and implementation, and the progression of self-efficacy, this review provided valuable insight into the development of group counselors. Although novice and expert group practitioners are differentiated extensively in the literature, research on the development of cognitive complexity among counseling students training as group facilitators is lacking. This section also detailed researcher support for integrative and experiential teaching methods used in the training of counseling students on group work and highlighted developmental areas on which counselor

educators may want to focus. The following section provides a further review of literature on Kolb's ELT (1984) and describes its usefulness in both counselor education and group work training. Later sections provide recommendations for further research into the development of group work expertise among counselors-in-training.

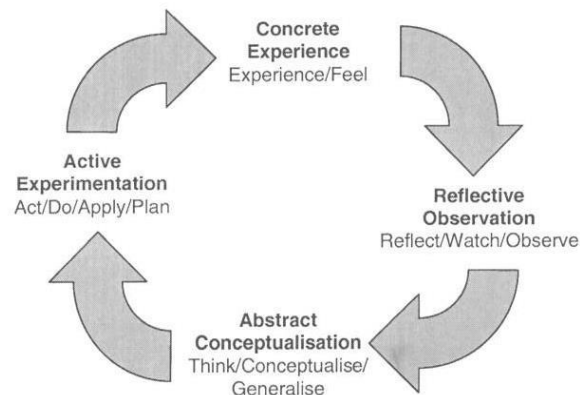
### **Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) in Training Counselors**

As described in previous sections of this literature review, research demonstrated the effectiveness of experiential learning methods used within counselor training. Counselor educators frequently utilize experientially-driven strategies to assist trainees in applying and synthesizing the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom (Anderson & Price, 2001; Bloom et al, 1956; Corey, 2015; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Many of the experiential learning techniques used in modern education stem from Kolb's (1984) ELT, which describes learning as a process of experiencing, engaging with, and adapting to one's own environment (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and provided the theoretical framework for the present study. The following sections offer a brief overview of ELT and its use within counselor education and group work training in particular.

### **History of Kolb's ELT**

Kolb (1984) described the premise of ELT as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 41). By incorporating the historical work of theorists such as Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, Freire, and Rogers, Kolb developed his theory to describe learning as an active, constant, and evolutionary process in which learners are tasked not only with grasping experiences concretely and abstractly, but also with transforming them through reflection and experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009). To visually represent this perpetual process, Kolb (1984) developed a model

known as “The Experiential Learning Cycle”, also sometimes referred to as a learning spiral. In addition to the four stages represented by the learning cycle, Kolb (1984) described what he categorized as four distinct learning styles based on individual preferences and natural cognitive tendencies. These stages and learning styles are further detailed in the paragraphs that follow. Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (Figure 1) highlights four stages he termed as: Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE).

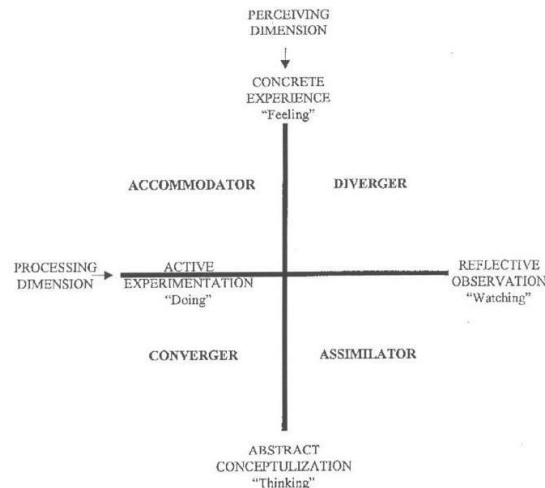


**Figure 1. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle.** (Chan, 2012)

As described above, CE and AC represent learners’ task of grasping experience, whereas RO and AE represent their responsibility to transform experience (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009). Kolb & Kolb (2009) noted the importance of individuals discerning how to balance a constant tension between all four areas while engaged in the learning process. Kolb (1984) suggested that as learners encounter new experiences, they cycle constantly through the four stages of experiencing something new, reflecting on that experience, thinking about and further conceptualizing what they have observed, and acting or applying what has been learned. As a result, engaging in this process helps individuals to construct and internalize new knowledge (Kolb, 1984) and mimics Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et

al., 1956) in that it emphasizes the developmental nature of learning from concrete knowledge through application and evaluation. Additionally, Kolb (1984) emphasized three stages of cognitive development, which again aligned closely with Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956). He referred to these stages as acquisition, specialization, and integration (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

In describing the cycle illustrated above, Yeganeh & Kolb (2009) were careful to remind readers that individuals progress through the stages of experiential learning in unique, individualized ways. Upon determining that approaches to learning are influenced by fluid factors including personality, social and cultural background, education, career, and personal responsibilities (Kolb, 1984; Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009), Kolb (1984) developed four learning styles which account for natural human differences. Based on the stages of his Experiential Learning Cycle, he identified these styles as accommodating, assimilating, converging, and diverging (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Assessing learning style can be helpful not only for trainees as they reflect on what helps them to engage with and learn from experiences, but also for educators who must consider the varying needs and interests of their students (Kolb, Kolb, Passarelli, & Sharma, 2014). I describe each of Kolb's (1984) four learning styles below. Figure 2 depicts the learning styles on a double-axis illustration representing the continuums associated with processing and perception.



**Figure 2. Kolb's Learning Styles.** (Loo, 2004)

Researchers (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005) described accommodating learners as those who prefer the intersection between experiencing and carrying out plans, and may learn best through hands-on interaction. These learners tend to engage more through perception and less through cognitive processing. Assimilating learners are the opposite, preferring to observe, reflect, and consider conceptualization. As such, assimilators typically learn best using logic and focusing on more traditional didactic instruction (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Divergent thinkers, or those who tend to rank higher on both processing and perception continuums, prefer to engage in experiences and spend time reflecting on their meaning. These individuals may learn most effectively by considering multiple perspectives on an experience and gathering relevant information to construct knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Finally, converging learners are those who enjoy the intersection of conceptualization and creating a plan of action. As such, they tend to engage at lower levels in both processing and perceiving, and may learn best through practical application, problem-solving, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Having identified and defined these learning cycle stages and related personal learning styles, Kolb's (1984) ELT provided a foundation from which educators built experiential teaching practices to effectively address individual student needs and varying approaches to the construction of knowledge. In the present study, I used Kolb's (1984) theory to analyze how participants' responses reflected the influence of small group experiences on their learning as future group leaders. Given that counseling is such an active, skills-based practice (Ivey et al., 2013) and that group facilitators must frequently be able to multi-task (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012), it is important to consider how incorporating experiential training methods may enhance trainees' development from novice students to skilled practitioners. Chan (2012) described the value of experiential learning in helping trainees to effectively translate skills and concepts learned in the classroom to practical application. As such, the following sections investigate the use of Kolb's (1984) ELT in both counselor education and group work training.

### **Kolb's ELT in Counselor Education and Group Work Training**

Counseling, as a profession, requires practitioners to be proficient not only in retaining knowledge, but also in applying learned skills and techniques effectively in their work with clients. As such, it is critical that counselor training provides students with opportunities for practical application long before they formally enter the professional arena. For many counselor educators, an experiential learning approach offers one effective method for providing and monitoring such opportunities (Gladding, 2012; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Kolb et al. (2014) described experiential education as "a complex relational process that involves balancing attention to the learner and to the subject matter while also balancing reflection on the deep meaning of ideas with the skill of applying them" (p. 204). As counseling itself frequently



emphasizes reflection on the part of both the client and the clinician, experiential learning lends itself nicely to the training of future practitioners.

According to researchers, experiential learning techniques are useful tools for addressing many counseling-related topics with trainees, including working effectively with multicultural populations (Kim & Lyons, 2003), enhancing emotional responsiveness (Grant, 2006), providing consultation (Sangganjanavanich & Lenz, 2012), and implementing creative interventions (Ziff & Beamish, 2004), to name a few. Experiential learning methods utilized in counselor training often include engaging students in a variety of activities, such as in-class role-plays and simulations (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Osborn et al., 2003), playing relevant games in class (Kim & Lyons, 2003), service learning opportunities in which students work in the surrounding community (Arnold & McMurtery, 2011; Jett & Delgado-Romero, 2009), and, at times, collaborative projects completed with peers (e.g., small groups) (Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Young et al., 2013). These activities help students to transition through the stages of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle by fostering for them a new means of engagement with practical experiences, including a way to make sense of their practice through reflection, observation, conceptualization, and consideration of experiences yet to come. Kolb's (1984) ELT aligns naturally with the notion that counselor training should be both professionally- and personally-oriented (Buser, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2013; Whiston & Coker, 2000) by allowing students to examine and describe their experiences from both vantage points. In exploring practical experiences on a deeper level, counseling trainees are more in tune with their own professional development, including relevant individual strengths and challenges, and more readily able to attend to these aspects. Additionally, utilizing Kolb's (1984) ELT to design and implement training curriculum may

assist counselor educators in better identifying and more effectively addressing varying student learning styles (Kolb et al., 2014).

In conjunction with assessing trainees' learning styles, counselor educators can also use one derivative of Kolb's (1984) ELT to examine their own approaches to teaching, and thereby find ways to more successfully connect with students (Kolb et al., 2014). Kolb et al. (2014) called this instrument the Educator Role Profile (ERP) and described it as a tool for identifying individual teaching styles and adapting them to best meet the learning styles of individual students. In describing the experiential educator as a facilitator, the authors defined facilitators as those who "...believe that learners can learn on their own and that their role is to remove obstacles and create conditions where learners can do so. Their role is not to instruct, provide answers and personal advice, or tell people what they should learn" (p. 207). This sounds strikingly similar to the widely agreed-upon definition of counselors as professionals who empower "diverse individuals, families, and groups" (American Counseling Association (ACA), 2015) to identify and reach their own goals related to wellness and mental health. As such, counselor educators adopting the experiential approach to training are able to model consistently for students the practice of effective facilitation. This may be an especially important element in experientially training counseling students as group facilitators, a topic which is addressed in the following paragraph.

The use of experiential methods within the group work training of counseling students is an approach that has been widely explored and demonstrated to be effective by researchers (Anderson & Price, 2001; Bacha & Rose, 2007; Corey, 2015; Fall & Levitov, 2002; Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Shumaker et al., 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Counselor educators frequently use experiential strategies based in Kolb's (1984) ELT to help

students practice skills related to group facilitation (Fall & Levitov, 2002; Furr & Barret, 2000; Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Killacky & Hulse-Killacky, 2004; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Riva & Korinek, 2004). Among these strategies are small groups, role-playing, student demonstration, and instructor modeling. One of the most commonly investigated experiential techniques is small group participation as a required element of group work training courses (Anderson & Price, 2001; Bacha & Rose, 2007; Shumaker et al., 2011; Rowell & Benshoff, 2008; Young et al., 2013). Although many studies provided in-depth descriptions of small group participation affecting students' comprehension of group dynamics, few focused on *how* this occurred or whether or not this requirement helped them to develop as group leaders. As such, it is not clear at this point if group membership influences trainees' abilities to effectively facilitate clinical groups. The present study seeks to begin answering that question.

### **Summary of Kolb's ELT in Training Counselors**

This section reviewed Kolb's (1984) ELT, the theoretical framework for the present study, including its history and extensive use within counselor education and group work training. After introducing the reader to ELT (Kolb, 1984), I described Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle and the four related learning styles he identified. The next section detailed the ways in which counselor educators use various experiential learning methods to help trainees move from conceptualization to application. Within both counselor education at large and group work training, these methods frequently include activities associated with role-playing, community work, and collaborative projects with peers (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Osborn et al., 2003; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Young et al., 2013). Although research on the use of small groups within group work training is plentiful, many studies failed to address whether membership and participation affected leadership

development, the issue at the focus of the present study. The section that follows provides a comprehensive summary of the preceding literature review.

### **Summary of Literature Review**

This literature review described five primary research areas relevant to the present study, including: the history, significance, efficacy, and future of group work in counseling, counselor training as a developmental process (including currently used models), the training of counseling students specifically in group work (including the infusion of field standards and current instructional practices), the development of counselors-in-training from novice to expert group facilitators, and the use of Kolb's (1984) ELT within counselor education and group work training. In its entirety, this literature review highlighted the need for further exploration of how required experiential elements influence the training of counseling students as group facilitators. This summary provides an overview of the major themes found within each section of this literature review.

The first section of this review described the history of group work within counseling, as well as its value, demonstrated effectiveness, and future as a therapeutic modality. Although varieties of group work existed long before, it was not until the mid-1900s that it was formally established as a clinical approach (Barlow et al., 2004; Gladding, 2012). Many well-known theorists contributed to the infusion of group work into counseling practice, including Alfred Adler, Fritz Perls, and Carl Rogers (Barlow et al., 2004; Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Throughout the years, group work developed into a complex therapeutic approach, researched extensively, promoted, and popularized by practitioners and professional organizations such as the ASGW, established in 1973. Many group work experts (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) hailed its value as a

clinical tool, noting flexibility (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012), reciprocity (Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), and demonstrated efficacy (Barlow et al., 2004; Burlingame et al., 2004; Gladding, 2012; Kivlighan, Coleman, & Anderson, 2000; Stout & Hayes, 2005; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) among its many benefits. Gladding (2012) and Corey (2015) suggested that the future of group work within counseling practice may see an increase in varied formats, whereas others predicted moves toward social justice advocacy (Singh et al., 2012; Singh & Salazar, 2010) and adaptations designed to better meet the demands of managed care (Cornish & Benton, 2001; Piper & Ogrodniczuk, 2004).

The second section of this literature review explored research devoted to developmentally oriented counselor training practices. Many researchers described counseling as both a professional and personal practice and called for integrative approaches to counselor education that attend to both domains (Buser, 2008; Gibbons et al., 2013; Whiston & Coker, 2000). A comparison between two models, the SCTM (Buser, 2008; Little et al., 2005; Urbani et al., 2002) and the CFTM (Swank & McCarthy, 2013), highlighted the use of integrative approaches, and several other studies demonstrated the effectiveness of varying instructional approaches to counselor education. These included a study emphasizing the value of using technology in skills training (Aladag, et al., 2014), one incorporating self-instruction methods (Schonrock-Adema et al., 2009), and two detailing the significance of using varied evaluation methods (Malott et al., 2014; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). This section of the review highlighted the importance of training counselors using creative, multi-layered approaches that target both the personal and professional development of trainees.

This section of this literature review detailed research on training counseling students as group facilitators in particular. The first part of this section provided an overview of professional

training standards relevant to group work as established by CACREP (2009) and the ASGW (2000; 2014). Then, I explored the various ways in which counselor educators infused these standards into group work curriculum, including a comparison of two group facilitation training models (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Smaby et al., 1999; Urbani et al., 2002; Zimmick et al., 2000) and an examination of additional instructional strategies used in teaching group work (Furr & Barret, 2000; Killacky & Hulse-Killacky, 2004; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Laux et al., 2007; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Riva & Korinek, 2004; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This section of the review established the use of varying techniques in training counselors as group facilitators, emphasizing researchers' support in particular for experientially oriented methods.

The fourth section of this review focused on the numerous differences between novice counseling trainees and expert group facilitators (Corey, 2015; Gladding, 2012; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Conyne et al. (1993) found that although 85% of counselors reported mastery of group work knowledge, only two percent reported receiving effective training in skill application. Three of the differences between novice and experts highlighted repeatedly in the literature included cognitive processing abilities (Kivlighan et al., 2007; Corey, 2015; Rubel & Kline, 2008), effective intervention design and implementation (Corey, 2015; Rubel & Kline, 2008), and reported levels of self-efficacy (Gladding, 2012; Ohrt et al., 2013; Rubel & Kline, 2008). Additionally, this section described research focused on the cognitive complexity of group counseling trainees, finding only two studies which explored this construct (Davison, 2014; Granello & Underfer-Babalis, 2004).

The final section of this review of the literature described Kolb's (1984) ELT and its use within both counselor education and group work training. Kolb (1984) developed a cyclical

model depicting the four stages of the experiential learning process and referred to them as Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualization (AC), and Active Experimentation (AE). These stages served as the foundation for the individual learning styles he identified as Accommodation, Assimilation, Convergence, and Divergence (Kolb, 1984). Recognizing and addressing these learning styles helps educators not only to examine how to best meet student needs, but also to identify their own approaches to teaching (Kolb et al., 2014). Kolb's (1984) ELT is widely used in counselor education and forms the basis for many of the experiential methods seen in group work training in particular, including role-play, student demonstration, peer collaboration, and instructor modeling (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Osborn et al., 2003; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005; Young et al., 2013). As such, it provides a viable method for helping counselors-in-training to make the transition from student to practitioner.

Having established the focus of existing literature and the need for further research on the training of counseling students as group facilitators, the section that follows describes the present study. Included in this description are an overview of the methodology used, including the procedures associated with data collection and analysis. The next section concludes with a description of ethical considerations taken into account while conducting this study.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Chapter Introduction**

This chapter focuses on the methods used to investigate the following research question: How do counseling students experience small group participation required as part of their academic training on group work? Because the purpose of this study was to explore the individual and collective perspectives and experiences of graduate counseling students, I used content analysis to qualitatively analyze transcribed interviews through the lens of ELT (Kolb, 1984). The following sections describe qualitative research design and content analysis methodology, and provide a brief overview of how researchers have used these approaches to investigate counselor education practices. I then describe the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and credibility in the present study, and present a description of the participants involved. Finally, I detail the data collection and analysis procedures used in conducting this study, including relevant limitations, strengths, and ethical considerations.

### **An Overview of Qualitative Research and the Content Analysis Approach**

The present study utilized a qualitative research method to examine the small group experiences of former counselors-in-training. I chose to use content analysis as a methodological approach to interpreting participants' transcribed interviews. The following sections describe these approaches to research, including associated benefits and disadvantages. After detailing the use of qualitative content analysis in investigating various aspects of counselor education, I discuss methods for maintaining trustworthiness throughout any qualitative study.

### **Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research generally begins with a question (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) and primarily helps researchers to learn about and describe both personal experiences and various life



phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Rossman and Rallis (2012) described qualitative research as a unique process in which the researcher is central to the study and provides the main conduit for conducting research. Its general purpose, according to these authors is to “learn about some facet of the social world” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 5). In addition to developing knowledge about the social world, qualitative researchers assume that individuals make meaning of their personal experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) and seek to understand both *what* those meanings are and *how* they are constructed. In this vein, I designed this study to explore and describe the experiences of counseling graduates who completed a Group Dynamics and Methods course during their academic training and were required to engage in experiential small groups as part of that course.

Creswell (2013) asserted that qualitative research must incorporate the voices of its participants, which I sought to do by interviewing former counselors-in-training, analyzing and interpreting their responses, and reporting them here, often in participants’ own words. I wanted to empower student participants (Creswell, 2013) to reflect upon and share their personal experiences of group work training, with the goal of understanding not only their individual perspectives, but also their collective experience and the influence which small group participation may have had on their learning as future group facilitators. Additionally, well-respected qualitative researchers stressed the importance of being able *use* qualitative findings in a larger context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). By capturing the experiences of these participants, I hoped to provide counselors educators and program accreditation bodies with insight into the ways in which experiential components can influence the training of counseling students, particularly with regard to group work. As such, a qualitative research method best suited the purpose of this particular study.

Qualitative design encapsulates a number of methodological approaches to inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) suggested that researchers take several preliminary considerations into account when choosing methodology and stressed the importance of identifying a particular approach which reviewers can effectively assess and which provides solid structure for the researcher. For this study, I chose to use qualitative content analysis to explore participant experiences as recorded in transcribed interviews. The following sections detail the content analysis approach to qualitative research and its application to both the present study and counselor education at large.

### **Content Analysis Approach to Qualitative Research**

Content analysis constitutes just one of many methods available to engage in qualitative research (Elo et al., 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Although Kondracki et al. (2002) highlighted the fact that researchers use content analysis both quantitatively and qualitatively, I describe it for the purposes of this study as a primarily qualitative approach. Elo et al. (2014) emphasized the use of content analysis for systematically conceptualizing phenomena and asserted its use both inductively and deductively as a research method. Hsieh & Shannon (2005) noted that the content analysis approach is especially helpful in interpreting the meaning of text data, which made it a suitable methodological option for conducting this study. In addition to text, Rossman and Rallis (2012) reported that researchers frequently use content analysis to analyze many other forms of communication, including music and pictures. Elo and Kyngas (2008) summarized the approach as a useful “method for making replicable and valid inferences from data... with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action” (p. 108).

Though content analysis represents one overall approach to qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), it can take several different forms when actually put into practice (Elo et al., 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). With regard to its flexibility as both an inductive and deductive process, Elo et al. (2014) noted that inductive researchers use the approach when describing a phenomenon that is new to the literature. In contrast, researchers use deductive content analysis when attempting to expand upon existing literature or make a comparison (Elo et al., 2014). The authors suggested, however, that all content analysis studies involve similar processes of thorough preparation, effective data organization, and the descriptive reporting of findings (Elo et al., 2014).

In addition to the deductive and inductive approaches detailed by Elo et al. (2014), Hsieh and Shannon (2005) described three strategies for using content analysis: conventional, directed, and summative. Briefly defined, the conventional approach is used to describe phenomena, directed is used to expand upon existing theories or phenomena descriptions, and summative is used to quantify text and better understand its contextual use (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Cho and Lee (2014) distinguished content analysis from other qualitative approaches based on its flexibility of use and need for researcher interpretation. In conducting this study, I used deductive content analysis to expand upon existing descriptions of the experiences of counselors-in-training in learning about group work. By exploring participant perspectives on engaging in required experiential small groups, I hoped to add a new dimension to the existing body of literature and contribute to counselor educators' insights about facilitating the training of these students. My focus on adding to the existing body of knowledge regarding counseling trainees' small group experiences constituted an approach that Hsieh and Shannon (2005) classified as directed content analysis. Although the present study investigated these student experiences in

the context of group work, several researchers utilized content analysis to explore other areas of counselor education. In the following section, I describe the use of content analysis in researching the counselor education discipline in general.

### **Content Analysis in Counselor Education Research**

Given the reflective nature of counseling, counselor education is a field that readily lends itself to the content analysis approach. Not only is the discipline rife with written reflection assignments (Granello, 2000; Kim & Lyons, 2003; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011) which supply researchers with ready-made data, but the inherently verbal nature of the counseling profession has additionally made more feasible the use of the qualitative interview as a research tool. Transcribed interviews provide another text format which qualitative researchers can analyze using the content analysis approach, and with the advent of new forms of media in recent years, counselor education research has witnessed a rise in content analysis-based literature. Related topics of interest have included, but are not limited to: multicultural counseling competencies (Worthington, Soth-McNett, & Moreno, 2007), the development and validation of various counseling interventions (Nuijens, Teglassi, Simcox, Kivlighan, & Rothman, 2006), the professional development of counselors-in-training (Cummings, Hallberg, Martin, Slemon, & Hiebert, 1990), counselor education pedagogy (Barrio Minton, Wachter Morris, & Yaates, 2014; Cashwell & Young, 2004), and the experiences of minority populations (Nadal, Wong, Issa, Meterko, Leon, & Wideman, 2011).

### **Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research and Content Analysis**

Rossmann and Rallis (2012) wrote that the “ultimate aim for a study should be use” (p. 59) and that in order for findings to be useful, consumers must believe in their integrity. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed that establishing trustworthiness throughout the research process

ensures findings which are “...worth paying attention to” (p. 290), hence increasing both research credibility and readers’ willingness to consider suggested implications. As such, I took several precautions to ensure trustworthiness and credibility throughout each phase of this study (Elo et al., 2014). The following paragraphs detail these measures.

In addition to usefulness, Rossman and Rallis (2012) cited several foundational elements for trustworthy qualitative research, including ethical practice by the researcher, the consideration of truth value, and the maintenance of rigor throughout the research process. Although I detail ethical considerations in a later section, I address the establishment of truth value and rigor here. Rossman and Rallis (2012) wrote that qualitative researchers “seek multiple perspectives about some phenomenon... truths, not Truth” (p. 62). In conducting this study, I sought to establish truth value by interviewing multiple participants, or triangulating my data (Creswell, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2012), so as to develop a fuller understanding of any realities which existed during participants’ time as small group members in their Group Dynamics and Methods graduate course. Following Rossman and Rallis’ (2012) recommendations for establishing truth value, my goal was to understand to the best of my ability the experiences of these participants and to represent them as honestly as possible in reporting my findings.

In addition, by engaging in a bracketing process with my dissertation Chair to clarify my own perspectives and biases (Creswell, 2013), and including a researcher interest statement in Chapter One, I attempted to provide a transparent description of the personal lens through which I analyzed and interpreted data. Biases that emerged during the bracketing process included my perspective that my own master’s-level training on group work was lacking, as well as the opinion that providing hands-on experiences facilitates the most effective learning processes for

students. Recognizing these biases based in my own experience helped me to clarify my interest in this topic and also helped me to maintain awareness and as much objectivity as possible throughout the research process. I also convened regularly with my Chair as I worked through data analysis, utilizing a process called peer debriefing (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Rossman & Rallis, 2012) to consider a critical but external perspective. Additionally, I invited all seven participants to review my initial written analysis of the data in a process known to qualitative researchers as member checking (Creswell, 2013; Elo, 2014) or participant validation (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This not only helped me to build a sense of ethical rapport with participants, but also allowed them the opportunity to clarify meaning, suggest revisions, and note any missing key information before I finalized my written report. Although given the opportunity, none of the participants chose to provide any corrective or critical feedback. However, taking these steps to ensure rigor helped me to consider my own influence on the research process and hold myself accountable for reporting findings as accurately as possible. Another strategy I used to establish rigor was to document consistently the process of collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing data (Rossman & Rallis, 2012) in a transparent and thorough audit trail. Doing so helped me to keep track of decisions made and issues considered along the way, as well as provided a method for me to use in building my rationale for the ways in which I analyzed and interpreted data.

Finally, in addition to establishing both truth value and rigor in my quest for trustworthiness, I also paid careful attention to the treatment of the data itself (Elo et al., 2014). By utilizing what Creswell (2013) described as, “Rich, thick description” to establish context for the data collected and reported, I invited readers to immerse themselves in the data and interpret its meaning from their own perspectives. I included direct participant quotes to provide readers

with the most complete and pure understanding of the data as possible, and to facilitate their evaluation of and investment in my analysis (Elo et al., 2014). Utilizing these strategies helped me to establish trustworthiness both in my process as a qualitative researcher and in the findings I ultimately reported.

### **Advantages and Limitations of a Content Analysis Approach to Qualitative Research**

As with any approach to qualitative research, content analysis offers both unique advantages and limitations. I address here several strengths and limitations associated with the approach as used in this particular study. Rossman and Rallis (2012) described content analysis as a "...systematic examination of forms of communication to objectively document patterns" (p. 196). One advantage, then, of content analysis is that it allows the researcher to remain objective to some extent about what he/she is investigating, depending on whether he/she used the method inductively or deductively. Although researcher bias is never fully lacking (Creswell, 2013), content analysis allows researchers to focus on patterns which emerge from analyzed text (here, transcribed interviews) if they so choose, rather than searching for text that fleshes out preconceived notions (Cho & Lee, 2014). Additionally, given that content analysis is useful for analyzing any range of mediums (photographs, music, fictional text, articles, advertisements, etc.; Rossman & Rallis, 2012), it provides a flexible, unique method for researchers to employ in better understanding the experiences of others.

Another advantage of content analysis is that its processes of coding and thematizing allow for large quantities of data to be condensed and managed more easily than in other qualitative approaches to conducting research (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The use of coding and collapsing into subsequent themes allows researchers to identify commonalities across documents, such as the interviews transcribed for this study. Though qualitative research is not

typically meant to be generalizable across populations (Creswell, 2013), content analysis allows qualitative researchers to simultaneously explore and better understand both individual and collective experiences. In this study, although I analyzed individual interviews, I sought ultimately to understand how one experiential small group requirement in a Group Dynamics and Methods course influenced the collective experiences of formerly enrolled counselors-in-training. Utilizing the content analysis approach allowed me to recognize emergent themes across these participants' individual experiences and gave me a sense of how the small group course requirement influenced the student experience in general.

Finally, another advantage of content analysis used in conjunction with interview is the in-depth perspective it provides researchers about participant experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). By utilizing the interview method, I was able to conversationally explore each participant's perspective as a former student and small group member, and utilized content analysis as a means for delving deeper into my analysis and understanding of their reflections at a later time. As qualitative research encourages validation techniques such as member-checking (Creswell, 2013), I was also able to re-visit any further questions I had upon analysis and clarify findings with participants beyond the interview process as necessary. This approach, then, allowed me to consider and reflect upon participant values, beliefs, and perspectives much more thoroughly than perhaps other approaches might have.

Although the advantages of the content analysis approach to qualitative research are plentiful, there are also several limitations inherent in its nature. First, it can be difficult for a researcher to narrow his/her focus, given the sheer abundance of data often collected in a study guided by content analysis. Creswell (2013) suggested that much of the material available in a qualitative study can be discarded, which is a difficult editing process for many researchers who



have worked hard to so rigorously and thoroughly explore participant experiences. In the same vein, it is impossible to capture and describe participant experiences in their entirety. Utilizing a content analysis approach based on interview is inherently limited and undoubtedly leaves many potential topics for discussion unaddressed.

Additionally, depending on the nature of the content analysis process chosen by a researcher, it can be easier at times for personal bias to infiltrate data interpretation. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) cautioned that researchers who seek to further describe a phenomenon within existing literature sometimes manipulate data in an effort to help the data better fit those thematic categories on which they are trying to expand. Examples of this potential in the current study could include purposely interpreting a participant quote to mean something other than intended, or unintentionally manipulating part of an interview to better fit a theme developed from my own personal bias rather than from actual participant data. Though I was careful in using my deductive approach in order to minimize the potential for this manipulation, it is important to make readers aware of the fact that content analysis is frequently accompanied by approach-specific challenges and potential limitations.

### **Summary of Qualitative Research and the Content Analysis Approach**

The introductory section of Chapter Three provided an overview of both qualitative research and the content analysis approach, including associated strengths and limitations. Due to the flexibility afforded by content analysis and its facilitation of the in-depth exploration of both individual and collective experiences, this study used Kolb's (1984) ELT to analyze transcribed interviews from recent counseling graduates who completed a Group Dynamics and Methods course as part of their graduate coursework. Through this theoretical qualitative lens, I explored the influence of a required experiential small group course component on students'

perspectives and experiences as future group facilitators. The next sections describe the counseling graduates who participated in this study and my procedures for collecting, maintaining, and analyzing data.

### **Participants**

The participants involved in this study included seven graduates recruited from a CACREP-accredited master's-level counseling program at a large public southeastern university. All participants completed the same Group Dynamics and Methods course as part of their core degree requirements for either school or clinical mental health counseling during the same semester within the past five years. In order to protect the confidentiality of all participants, I chose to keep the specifics associated with course enrollment somewhat vague. This cohort of students was chosen because it was larger than other recently matriculated cohorts and would therefore provide a larger pool of more potentially eligible participants. Additionally, because students from this cohort all matriculated within the past three years, I assumed they would be able to still recall and reflect upon their training experiences accurately, while also providing insight into how those experiences translated into the field of professional practice. Participants included five females and two males ranging from ages 24 to 28, as well as six Caucasians and one African American. Six of the participants were clinical mental health counseling graduates, and one graduated with a degree in school counseling. All but one participant are currently practicing in either professional school or clinical mental health counseling.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Rossmann and Rallis (2012) wrote that, "Gathering data is a discovery process" (p. 168), with Creswell (2013) adding that doing so involves, "A 'circle' of interrelated activities... that include but go beyond collecting data" (p. 145). The "Data Collection Circle" to which Creswell

(2013) referred involves seven responsibilities assumed by the researcher, including locating participants, gaining access and building rapport, sampling, actually collecting data, recording information, resolving issues, and storing data appropriately. Though I detail many of these activities elsewhere in this chapter, here I provide a general overview of the data collection process for this study, which closely followed Creswell's (2013) recommendations.

After determining my initial topic and site of interest during the fall semester of 2014, as well as securing institutional review board (IRB; Appendix A) approval for this study, I gained access to participants by asking the Group Dynamics and Methods course instructor to email eligible former students (purposeful sampling; Creswell, 2013) with my written invitation to participate (Appendix B). The invitation informed potential participants of the nature of this study, including its purpose and the requirements associated with participation. Immediately, I began working to build rapport (Creswell, 2013) by engaging potential participants with a friendly and warm invitation, in which I thoroughly outlined the steps I was asking them to take. I provided my informed consent statement (Appendix C) in this initial invitation to participate and described explicitly for recipients the fact that participation was strictly voluntary and that they would be able to withdraw at any time without penalty. I also assured them that either choosing to participate, or, in contrast, choosing not to, would result in absolutely no sort of repercussion. I asked those willing to serve as interviewees to email me directly to indicate their interest. Criteria for eligibility included that participants were recently (within the past three years) matriculated graduate counseling students (either school or clinical mental health) who had successfully completed (academically passed) their Group Dynamics and Methods course and were available for face-to-face interviews. I responded to interested parties by email to scheduled individual interviews.

Prior to conducting individual interviews, I asked each participant to read and sign the informed consent statement (Appendix C) outlining their voluntary participation and right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, this consent described the potential benefits and risks involved in study participation and offered participants an opportunity to review my findings once compiled. I then engaged in data collection by interviewing each participant for an average of one hour in my university office, using both a pre-determined interview protocol and spontaneous follow-up questions based on participants' responses. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of each participant and later transcribed, and I took handwritten notes during each interview. Following the tenets of the qualitative method, I engaged in the interview and analysis processes until I reached the point of data saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and was no longer receiving new information. This resulted in seven complete interviews. Later sections of this chapter address Creswell's (2013) final data collection steps, including the identification and resolution of ethical issues, as well the appropriate storage of collected data.

### **Source and Description of the Data**

For the present study, I collected data by interviewing seven recent counseling graduates, following their completion of a graduate-level Group Dynamics and Methods course as part of the requirements for a master's-level degree in counseling. Data consisted of the transcripts of each interview. I recruited participants from one course section, in which the instructor required students to engage in weekly experiential small group meetings with classmates and assigned doctoral group facilitators. I provide the syllabus description of this experiential small group requirement verbatim in the following section.

## Weekly Small Group Meetings

During the course of the semester, students' small groups met on 12 separate occasions. The instructor randomly assigned students to small groups of six to eight, with randomly appointed doctoral facilitators. In an email communication with me, the course instructor described his efforts to avoid fostering dual relationships among student group members and between members and facilitators. He reported asking students to identify their two closest peers in the class and then count off by threes to form small groups. In doing so, the instructor stated that he was able to decrease the occurrence of peer-to-peer dual relationships and/or inherent subgrouping (J. Diambra, personal communication, January 29, 2015). Additionally, after randomly assigning one doctoral facilitator to each of the three small groups, the instructor reported that he asked leaders to check their small group rosters and identify any potential dual relationship issues that needed to be resolved before small group meetings began (J. Diambra, personal communication, January 29, 2015).

Students were required to attend one-hour small group sessions following weekly class meetings, which counted alongside regular course attendance. The instructor asked students to reflect on either their small group or in-class experiences in five written reflection assignments throughout the semester. Although the instructor provided no explicit written purpose for or description of the experiential small group participation requirement, he did give the following disclosure in the course syllabus:

*Exploring methods of group facilitation and participating in group dynamics is an exciting, eye-opening, complex and risky business. There are many new concepts to learn, understand, practice, and experience. Most learners are familiar and comfortable with the didactic teaching approach. This style of teaching will be used, at times, during this course. However, group dynamics cannot be effectively taught or learned by simply sharing concepts. The students and instructors participating in this course inherently make up a group. Additionally, smaller sub-groups can be easily and quickly be established creating different group dynamics. These dynamics provide a unique and*

wonderful environmental opportunity for *en vivo*, experiential, and interactive group learning. Yes, that means you will have many opportunities to participate as a group member in different contexts. As you do, pay close attention to your experience as a group member: your feelings, thoughts, observations, the feedback you give and receive, etc. You will, whether you enjoy it or not, experience a wide range of emotions during this course. I encourage you to embrace this as a learning opportunity. At times you may be tempted to avoid exploring new feelings or experiences because of discomfort. Again, I encourage you to take some risks, take some chances. Our goal is to learn about and practice group dynamics. This will help you remember how your future “clients” may experience being a member of a group. It is important to note, group activities are not intended to psycho-therapeutic or counseling in nature. It is my experience, however, that some participants will experience the group as psycho-therapeutic or as counseling— it really cannot be avoided. Introspective learning is inherently cathartic and therapeutic at times. Second, pay close attention to your other group members. They provide models/examples of different types of group participants. Third, pay close attention to those who facilitate the group processes. They also provide you with models of group facilitation (albeit, models you may or may not want to emulate). **Moreover, respect all the members of your group. Each group member has the right to “pass” at any time for any reason. This right will be respected.** Lastly, the information shared in group can be personal in nature. **Confidentiality must be maintained regarding information shared during group interactions.**

Experiential opportunities, primarily small group work will occur inside and outside the classroom. On occasion, students will be asked to divide into small groups or remain in one large group for class activities. Additionally, a course assignment will require students to attend group sessions in the community. Both of these group venues will provide experiences to highlight group dynamics and provide students an opportunity to reflect upon these experiences and integrate group concepts from the course (Diambra, 2013).

## Data Storage

To store both audio recordings and transcripts securely, I followed an established procedure for each individual interview. I recorded all interviews on the same digital recorder and downloaded each audio recording immediately post-interview to my personal, password-protected laptop. To protect each participant’s identity, I saved and labeled each audio file anonymously, using the unique pseudonyms chosen by each participant. Following the download of each interview to my computer, I subsequently and permanently deleted all audio recordings from my digital recorder.

Upon transcribing each interview, I saved and labeled documents anonymously, again utilizing the unique pseudonyms chosen by each participant. I encrypted each transcript with a private password and stored them all on my password-protected personal computer. I also stored printed hard copies of transcribed interviews in a locked filing cabinet in my home to which only I had access. Consistent with university policy, data will be stored for three years and then destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2013) described the data analysis process as a particularly difficult task for qualitative researchers, given the myriad of associated responsibilities that include organizing the data, conducting preliminary reviews, coding and categorizing themes, deciding on how to best represent data, and developing sound interpretations. Rossman and Rallis (2012) described the analysis process as “bringing meaning to the piles of data you gather” (p. 262) and noted that an effective process is “both iterative and sequential” (p. 262) and requires researchers to engage in a number of interrelated activities similar to those suggested by Creswell (2013). To analyze the data collected for this study, I followed Creswell’s (2013) five-step process of organizing the data, reading it thoroughly and making initial notes, identifying codes and themes, interpreting data meaning, and developing a representation to effectively reflect my interpretations.

In working to organize the data, I transcribed the interviews into seven individual documents labeled using each participant’s chosen pseudonym. This helped me to begin to personalize each interview and to associate in my mind the themes of each transcript with individual faces and names. In the second step, I printed and read through each transcript multiple times, handwriting notes within the margins and at the end of each individual document. Creswell (2013) referred to this note-taking process as “memoing” (p. 183). Memoing helped

me to organize my thoughts, questions, observations and reflections in a thorough, but consistent manner as I began processing such a voluminous amount of collected data. Additionally, this process was helpful in maintaining a clear audit trail and narrowing my focus as I increasingly immersed myself in the data.

Having read several times for an initial understanding of each transcript, I then moved into a process of identifying codes that emerged from the data. Creswell (2013) described the coding process as "...aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code... and then assigning a label to the code" (p. 184). This involved reading through each transcript yet again and coding interviewee responses sentence by sentence. Examples of codes that appeared repeatedly throughout the seven transcripts include: observation, modeling, expectations, nervousness, excitement, facilitator performance, group membership, hands-on activities, timing, application, reflection, positive experiences, and negative experiences.

After generating a list of codes for each individual interview, I then took those codes and collapsed them into themes, or larger categories under which related codes seemed to fit (Creswell, 2013). This helped me to better organize the sheer amount of data with which I was working and helped me to recognize currents of commonality throughout the collection of interviews. Creswell (2013) recommended that qualitative researchers aim for no more than seven themes. The data collected in this study resulted in five overall themes, including: "Expectations", "The Emotional Experience", "The Learning Process", "Preparation", and "Missing Pieces." I review and discuss these themes in detail in Chapters Four and Five. The following example demonstrate my process of collapsing several codes into one common theme.



First, I examined my list of individual codes and identified those that could be re-assigned to begin the consolidation process. One example of this is noting participants' repeated mention of feeling similarly "anxious" and "nervous" and linking these together under the more frequently used term of "nervous." Then, upon recognizing that participants also spoke frequently of other feelings encountered during the small group experience, including "excitement", "anticipation", "enjoyment", "frustration", "disappointment", and "discomfort" (all which had been individually coded), I identified a theme of participants reflecting on their small group participation as an experience universally characterized by a variety of memorable feelings. As a result, I was able to collapse the numerous afore-mentioned codes into an overarching theme that became "The Emotional Experience."

Following the thematization of the data, I moved into further examining each theme using Kolb's (1984) ELT as my theoretical lens, which is described further in Chapter Five. Creswell (2013) described qualitative interpretation as "...abstracting out... to the larger meaning of the data" (p. 187). For this study, I reviewed each theme and thought about its connection to Kolb's (1984) ELT, as well as to counselor education at large. In continuing with the above example, once I had identified the theme of "The Emotional Experience", I considered how emotion related to Kolb's (1984) theory and the influence emotion may contribute to learning by way of experience. In particular, I tried to interpret what the collective student experience had been in these required small groups and what that experience meant in relation to the training of counseling students as future group facilitators. In addition to reviewing each theme as its own entity, I examined themes as a whole and worked to identify any sense of order or significance in how they connected to one another and to the greater body of related literature that already exists. Additionally, I consulted regularly with my dissertation Chair throughout this process,

seeking both an external critical opinion and validation of my own understanding. In working through the final step of Creswell's (2013) suggested process for data analysis, I sought to represent the data in a manner in which readers could understand both my process and my findings. I wrote drafts of my findings and subsequent interpretations and sent them to all participants and my Chair for review before finalizing my write-up.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Rossman and Rallis (2012) described the ethical researcher as one who utilizes his/her "moral principles to guide... decision making" (p. 68) while conducting any research study. Creswell (2013) cautioned researchers to be sensitive to ethical issues throughout the duration of the research process, noting that many qualitative investigators mistakenly expect these considerations to arise during data collection alone. Instead, Creswell (2013) encouraged researchers to consider potential ethics issues prior to conducting any study, during data collection, analysis, and reporting phases, and throughout the process of working toward publication. Rossman and Rallis (2012) characterized these considerations in qualitative research as an "ethic of care" (p. 70), highlighting the need for attention paid to the concrete rather than the abstract details, and a focus on maintaining ethical relationships with study participants above all else. They remind us that although ethical issues are not necessarily fixable, researchers are generally able to work through them using moral decision-making processes backed by sound reasoning (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The following section identifies the ethical issues inherent in this study and provides a brief overview of measures taken to address these considerations.

In following Rossman and Rallis' (2012) recommendation to focus primarily on engaging in ethical relationships with participants, the ethical considerations associated with this particular

study centered on the ethical treatment of interviewees. As such, the first ethical steps I took were to secure IRB approval (Appendix A) and gain permission to interview former students from the Group Dynamics and Methods course instructor at the university where I conducted this study. After receiving both approvals, my next ethical decision was to consider how to provide participants with thorough informed consent (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In the interest of transparency, I chose to include my informed consent statement (Appendix C) in the initial invitation to participate, which the course instructor emailed to potential participants. By doing so, I thoroughly described the nature of the study, as well as the measures put in place to ensure participant confidentiality, from our very first contact. I also immediately provided potential participants with an overview of the potential risks and benefits associated with the interview process and invited them to contact me of their own volition if interested in participating. I reviewed informed consent (Appendix C) again at the beginning of each individual interview and explained to interviewees their rights as study participants. I secured their consent by asking them to sign their understanding of involvement in the study, potential risks and benefits associated with their participation, and their rights to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, as well as to review my findings once compiled.

Another ethical consideration discussed widely in the literature is reciprocity, defined by Creswell (2013) as, “Giving back to participants for their time and efforts in our projects...” (p. 55). Rossman and Rallis (2012) stressed the importance of reciprocity as well, noting that mutual care and respect between researchers and study participants is essential. Ethically speaking, I attempted to achieve reciprocity throughout the research process, by conveying to participants a genuine concern for their experiences, perspectives, and wellbeing. Additionally, I offered to disseminate study results at the conclusion of the dissertation process and described

for participants the ways in which their willingness to share their experiences could potentially contribute to this particular field of research. My method for sharing results involved contacting participants by email once this dissertation was published and providing them with an electronic link to visit and review the manuscript as they chose. As a qualitative researcher, my primary concern was to avoid harming participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), which I believe I conveyed not only through showing care for their welfare during the interview process, but also by providing them with the option to withdraw from the study at any time. I also was careful to provide the appropriate information for all relevant contacts (myself, university IRB representative, faculty dissertation Chair, therapeutic referrals as requested) with whom they could communicate if at any point they experienced discomfort as the result of participation.

Finally, in heeding Creswell's (2013) admonition to consider ethical issues at all phases of the research process, I was careful while analyzing and reporting findings to maintain as much objectivity as possible, as well as to protect the confidentiality of participants by securely storing any data collected and removing all identifying information from transcribed data and written reports. Allowing all participants to choose pseudonyms early in the research process helped them to invest in a unique way and helped me, in a sense, to re-identify and personalize each of them and to protect their privacy as I disseminated my findings. I also took the precaution of reminding them that discussing their study involvement with former class peers would not only breach confidentiality, but might also unfairly identify those students who chose to participate and those who did not.

### **Summary of Methodology**

In Chapter Three, I provided an overview of both qualitative research and the content analysis approach, including their use in counselor education in particular. Then, I described the data

collection and analysis methods employed in conducting this study and provided an overview of how I securely stored collected data. Additionally, I outlined several methods used to ensure trustworthiness and credibility and described the limitations and strengths of using the content analysis approach to explore my research question. Finally, I described the primary ethical considerations relevant to this study and detailed my efforts to safeguard the confidentiality and wellbeing of all study participants.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **Chapter Introduction**

In this chapter, I report findings from my content analysis of seven transcribed interviews with counseling graduates who participated in experiential small groups required as part of their academic training in a Group Dynamics and Methods course. I asked participants to choose their own pseudonyms and the following findings represent only the personal small group experiences as described by “Dolly”, “Felicity”, “Harry”, “Olivia”, “Elle”, “Joy”, and “Mike.” I present these findings in five identified themes representing the most salient reflections made by individual participants and by the group as a whole. These themes include: “Expectations”, “The Emotional Experience”, “The Learning Process”, “Preparation”, and “Missing Pieces.” Following a detailing of each theme, I highlight the key findings of this study and provide a brief summary.

### **Thematic Analysis**

This section reports findings from an analysis conducted across all seven participant interviews. This thematic analysis focused on highlighting commonalities throughout participant experiences, identifiable only after engaging in a thorough process of coding each interview to identify the most salient reflections made by participants. Here, I detail the five most prominent themes that emerged upon data analysis. Near the end of this section, Table 1 provides a visual representation of findings, including direct participant quotes that illustrate each theme.

#### **Theme 1: “Expectations”**

The first identified theme related specifically to participants’ initial expectations of what the small group experience would entail and what sort of value it might offer to counselors-in-training learning about group work. Upon being asked early in each interview to reflect in

general on what they remembered about the small group experience, all seven participants recounted their initial expectations of what the purpose of the small group requirement was and how the experience might unfold. While some of the participants reported not knowing what to expect or not remembering many concrete personal expectations (Olivia, Joy, Elle), others recalled that their small group experiences met or exceeded their expectations in positive ways (Dolly, Mike). Still others reflected on overall experiences they found disappointing in their failure to meet initial expectations as related to varying factors (Harry, Felicity).

Olivia, Joy, and Elle all recalled that although they may not have initially known what to expect from their small groups, they did walk away at the end of the semester with the sense that their experiences had been different from what they anticipated. Olivia and Elle described a lack of instructor explanation regarding the small group requirement, and Olivia contended that perhaps a more detailed explanation from the course instructor would have been helpful for her in initially conceptualizing the group's purpose. Mike, conversely, found the sense of the unknown to be an "exciting" element of the small group requirement. Joy spoke the least about her expectations of the experience, other than reporting that she found it to be a less formal group setting than she initially thought it might be.

Dolly spoke at length about the ways in which the small group experience exceeded her expectations related to purpose and depth of interaction, noting in particular the unexpected vulnerability of group members willing to share on personal topics and the camaraderie that developed as a result. She reflected, "Like when I went into it, I didn't *expect* that I would get to know these people on such a deep level and I thought that was really nice." Mike described a similar sense of bonding among his small group members, noting that although none of them truly knew what to expect from the experience, they all ended up unexpectedly looking forward

to their small group session after class every week and continued to meet regularly as a group even beyond the end of the semester. He described his small group experience as a “very positive” one and stated that while most of his expectations were met in a productive fashion, even those that were not met were helpful in some way. One example of this was his expectation about how the small group would be facilitated, which turned out to be “...just about the opposite...” of what actually occurred and helped him to shape his own present approach to group leadership.

Although many of the participants reported generally positive small group experiences, Harry and Felicity reported significant dissatisfaction with regard to the group’s failure to meet their expectations. Harry found the random group member selection process somewhat disappointing and felt the need to restructure his expectations of the experience upon learning who the other members of his small group would be. He also shared his expectation that the small group would provide a setting for experiencing firsthand elements of the content discussed in the Group Dynamics and Methods course, and his disappointment when, as he recalled, that failed to happen. Conversely, Felicity described an initial expectation that the small group was “...just an exercise...” and not designed to be a “real group” and recounted an initial lack of investment resulting from this expectation. She reflected on experiencing a sense of surprise at the end of the semester upon realizing that “...we really *had* a group!” but shared that although she found the experience to be effective in ways she did not expect, she still felt that it could have been more valuable overall. Harry also shared disappointment in the overall result of the experience, noting that although he did see his small group membership as a learning experience, the learning occurred differently from what he both “expected and wanted.” This topic is further detailed in Theme 5: “Missing Pieces.”



## **Theme 2: “The Emotional Experience”**

The second primary theme that emerged across interviews related to the fact that all participants described the experience as an emotional one in some capacity. Each participant described varying emotions related to their small group in both positive and negative ways and because each individual experience was so emotionally unique, I provide here a brief overview of each participant’s reflections on feelings encountered. I also note that many participants (Dolly, Mike, Harry, Olivia, Joy) referred to emotion in a two-fold manner, speaking at times not only of their own personal emotions within the small group experience, but also of the emotional processes and interactions that occurred during small group sessions between group members.

With regard to her own emotional experience, Dolly described an initial sense of reluctance to investing in the small group experience due to its late-night timing and her perception that, “...it was gonna be small, and quiet, an awkward, and we’re all just kinda gonna be doing activities that none of us really wanted to do.” As the group progressed and she built closer relationships with her peers, Dolly reported developing senses of enjoying and appreciating the experience and noted that her initial nervousness about being in a group setting dissipated as she felt increasingly accepted by her fellow group members.

Dolly also described briefly the emotional processes that occurred within her small group, recalling her surprise at the level of vulnerability group members were willing to embrace. She stated, “I remember... all of our personal things that came up, that I didn’t expect to. I know at least, at least one time, everybody cried. Like there was not a time, like there was a not a single person that didn’t cry at least during one session. Um, and it was usually a different person each time.” Dolly noted that these emotional experiences helped to solidify cohesion among group members.

Felicity described her own emotional experience less than other participants, but did recall feeling initially skeptical, which was apparent in her reflection that "...when I went in, I was very much like, 'This isn't a group.' Like, although things can happen within a group, this still isn't really necessarily beneficial." As a result, Felicity also described a personal hesitance to share within the small group setting, describing it as a choice of which she was constantly aware. She did relay a sense of decreased skepticism throughout the small group process and attributed it to recognizing that although not all sessions were personally helpful for her, and at times left her feeling unproductive, some of them were highly beneficial to other members. She also described a sense of comfort that developed for her over the course of the semester as she settled into the group experience and recalled her appreciation of the group facilitator's transparency regarding the practical, logistical side of preparing for and executing group facilitation. Interestingly, some of the emotions Felicity recalled most vividly seemed to occur *after* the completion of the small group experience. She highlighted the fact that she felt "incredibly nervous and unprepared" upon facilitating her first clinical group during practicum, but conceded that "...there's no way to prepare or explain to someone *how* to take the gravity of the [Group Dynamics and Methods] course at the time." Felicity did not describe any emotional processing within her small group.

Harry detailed extensively his own emotional journey through the small group experience, noting his initial excitement at the prospect of being vulnerable and wanting to better know his classmates. He described the anticipation of the small group experience as a "thrilling opportunity" and stated, "I went into the group class knowing that it was going to be one of my favorite experiences." Harry recounted that this initial anticipation turned quickly to a sense of disappointment upon learning that none of his already established social circle would be in his

small group. He described an immediate sense of frustration upon beginning the small group experience as he surmised that he was more skilled in group facilitation methods than others in the group, including his assigned doctoral group facilitator. Harry described this feeling of frustration as an ongoing struggle throughout the small group process and described it as a challenge that forced him to engage in “calculated vulnerability” as a small group member. As a result, Harry reflected, he “...would leave the group sometimes, saying, ‘I wasn’t a part of the group in that moment’” and recalled feeling alone in that sentiment. Harry did describe a renewed sense of excitement upon learning he would have the opportunity to co-facilitate a small group session, which again turned to disappointment when his co-facilitator and fellow group members failed to respond to his facilitation as deeply as he had hoped they would. Ultimately, Harry described vacillating emotions related to a strong sense of self-awareness and a lack of genuineness between him and fellow group members throughout the small group experience. He stated at one point, “I guess I never really saw myself as a group member” and described lacking senses of safety and trust and a lingering sense of discomfort.

Although Harry described in-group emotional processes less extensively than his own emotional journey, he did mention repeatedly the vulnerability expressed by other group members and his sense that they valued the experience differently and more so than he did. He referred to the emotions of others mostly in juxtaposition with his own – noting those who felt more shy or nervous than him, those who seemed to experience emotional breakthroughs at some point in the process, and those who felt similarly disengaged. He described his small group experience as superficial in the sense that it became more of a complaint forum than a learning opportunity and that other group members seemed satisfied at times with avoiding emotional processing in favor of maintaining a safe sense of superficiality. Harry surmised that if he had

felt more challenged by his group members or facilitator, he "...would've left with a more positive experience... or emotions connected to it."

Similarly to her participant counterparts, Olivia described a range of emotions related to her small group experience. Initially, she remembered feeling uncomfortable, annoyed, and slightly angry based on a lack of knowing what to expect, but described routinely looking forward to small group sessions after their first meeting went successfully. She described an enthusiasm for spending time with her small group members each week, noting that her perspective shifted quickly from wanting to go home early and skip small group, to wanting to leave class early to get to small group. She reflected upon a sense of comfortable vulnerability among group members and credited the facilitator for sharing her own experiences to provide an environment of safety. Olivia recalled in particular the emotions she experienced related to various small group activities, noting those that made her angry and those that helped her to open herself up to sharing with the group. She stated that although she enjoyed the experience, she felt a sense of disconnection and at times, a lack of focus, reporting "...I remember thinking like, 'I don't really feel like it meshed very well together. Like, it [class and small group] felt like to separate things to me...'".

With regard to emotional experiences within the small group, Olivia described the anxiety shared by her and other group members stemming from the initial structure of the group, in which each member would speak or respond to a prompt in turn. She recalled group members collaborating to provide evaluative feedback to the group facilitator and restructuring the ways in which discussion was facilitated. According to Olivia, this helped group members to open up more organically and genuinely, thereby establishing deeper, more meaningful connections among themselves.

Elle spoke the least about the small group experience from an emotional standpoint, noting primarily the stress associated with initially being sorted into groups and the relief of not getting stuck with dissatisfactory peers or a less-than-ideal group facilitator. She recalled “overall, enjoying the experience”, but at times feeling frustrated with the late-night timing of group sessions, and the occasional sense of wasting time. Similarly to Olivia, she recalled particular activities that elicited emotional responses from her in group, recounting one experience in particular where she felt embarrassed crying unexpectedly in front of her peers. Elle also described a sense of relief in learning that she would not have to facilitate a small group session as she originally expected. She did not mention emotional processing within the small group setting other than her own personal examples.

Joy’s emotional reflections were the only ones that centered primarily on group processing and interpersonal events. With regard to her own feelings, Joy shared that she “...remember[ed] being really shy”, nervous, and painfully self-aware, particularly in the early stages of the small group experience. She recalled feeling uncomfortable and awkward in a few “dramatic” group situations, but described those moments as learning experiences. She stated that she enjoyed the experience overall and described a sense of comfort that grew throughout the semester, similarly to what some of the other participants described. Joy also described feeling hesitant at times to speak her mind, based on the responses she anticipated from her peers.

Interestingly, Joy pinpointed many more interpersonally emotional moments from her small group experience than other participants did. She recalled, laughingly, “...my group got right into it, and had more drama I think than some of the other ones, but at the same time I think that, like, showed me how groups can be tricky and scary, especially for members in it.” She

reflected on one emotional moment between two group members sharing different experiences with the same personal issue, and the emotional impact she and the rest of her group members felt as a result. She described recognizing in that moment the "...power of a group and the power of different perspectives and how it can kind of broaden... how you think about your own situation by hearing about other people's." She also recalled a specific instance of conflict between two group members, as well as between one group member and the facilitator, and described the group-wide discomfort that seemed to develop as a result.

Finally, Mike spoke of the emotional side of the small group experience with regard to both his own emotions and the processes that occurred within his small group. Mike described his emotional reaction to the experience very positively, noting that he enjoyed it and found small group to be "...something [he] always looked forward to..." and felt excited about. He described himself as feeling very inquisitive throughout the small group process, particularly with regard to his group facilitator's approach and what he could anticipate from week to week. He recounted his appreciation for the bonds established between group members and, similarly to Olivia and Elle, Mike remembered specific activities that caused him to feel particularly energized, engaged, and challenged. Mike also noticed his tendency to feel unfocused at times as other group members shared and reflected this self-awareness by noting, "...it taught me the importance of staying focused on the person who's talking – I found myself often drifting off into my own thoughts... I can't do that as a group facilitator." Much like many of the other participants, Mike described a sense of comfort that grew as he settled into the small group experience, noting that any initial "...discomfort [was] a motivator after a while, into action." He recalled feeling empowered as a group member to provide feedback to the facilitator and to work with his peers in building a group that was all their own.

Although Mike's discussion of the small group experience as an emotional one revolved primarily around his own emotions, he did vaguely discuss emotional processes within the small group itself. He noted his initial assumption about how group cohesion would occur, recalling his thought that crying would be the driving force. He laughed as he recalled that, "Although we did get close, we didn't... cry that much – I didn't cry at all, but some people I think were drawn to tears, moved to tears." He also reflected on the fact that feeling empowered as a group eventually led to the group being somewhat self-sufficient, in that it ran itself with little prompting from the facilitator.

### **Theme 3: "The Learning Process"**

The third theme that emerged upon analyzing collected data was participants' descriptions of *how* learning occurred within their experiential small groups. All seven participants agreed that they learned from the small group experience, albeit in sometimes different ways than expected. Common reflections related to this learning process included an appreciation for the hands-on elements inherent in the use of experiential methods, intentional practices of observation and reflection, and consulting with members of other small groups to compare experiences. Each of these considerations is further detailed in this section.

Each of the participants in this study described him/herself as an active, involved learner in some capacity and expressed an appreciation for hands-on and interactive learning opportunities. Several of the participants noted simply the importance of being able to use the experiential small group requirement as an initial group experience itself, whether they participated primarily as members or facilitators. Dolly referred to herself as an "action learner", noting that for her, it is important to *see* and *experience* concepts in action. She shared, "I can read books all day every day and I can memorize them, but until I see it actually happen... I'm

not gonna *really* understand it.” Joy echoed this sentiment and extended it even beyond herself, noting that, “I guess personally I feel like people learn better by *doing*, especially with counseling. I mean, you can read counseling in a textbook and know all of the theory, but in practice, it’s totally different and it’s a different feeling.” Felicity continued the trend of experiential enthusiasm, describing experience itself as “...a major part of learning, for me, as a student or as a person.” Harry stated, “I learn from experience. Absolutely.” Olivia, too, described herself as a “...hands-on learner...” and ventured as far as to say that due to its experiential nature, she “...learned way more from small group than the group class.” Elle recounted this phenomenon more extensively, sharing that, “I like to actually *do* things and so the sheer fact that I was actually able to participate in and experience a group, made it so much better. And I think that helped all of the concepts kind of stick with me.” Mike asserted of his small group experience, “[There’s] no better way to learn than to have a hands-on experience, for me. I’m a visual, hands-on kind of person. [It’s] one thing for me to read it, and recite it back, another thing to *do*. So, we *did*, that’s for sure.”

Within the umbrella of experiential learning, participants also expressed a proclivity during their small group experiences to use observation and reflection as tools for learning and making meaning. All seven participants described the value of watching other group members interact and observing group facilitators in action. With regard to observing their small group facilitators, each participant described instances in which their facilitators modeled behaviors they either wanted to adopt or wanted to avoid. Modeled behaviors described by the participants included the utilization of theory in a group setting, conflict of management, appropriate self-disclosure, and balancing effectively between enforcing structure and allowing flexibility. Mike and Elle mentioned that observing their group facilitators helped them to begin to develop their



own unique group facilitation styles, grounded in behaviors they had witnessed and either wanted to imitate or wanted to improve upon. Felicity described modeling by her facilitator as “...super helpful... it’s like that other piece that you don’t get when you read it or when someone says it to you – that... second level of understanding.”

Several participants also described observation as beneficial in other ways. Harry described using his observations of the course instructor as a gauge for how his small group facilitator should behave. Joy and Harry both described the power inherent in observing the behaviors and interactions of other group members. Mike recalled observing for content students had learned about in class (e.g., Yalom and Leszcz’s (2005) therapeutic factors) and observing his own feelings throughout the small group experience. He described later channeling his observations into written reflections as a part of a group course assignment.

While a few other participants (Elle, Joy, Harry, Olivia) also mentioned the written reflection assignments, all participants discussed some reflective component in their learning processes as related to the small group experience. Felicity described the value of reflecting during small group sessions on what she was observing and the practice of reflecting on curricular topics covered in class. Olivia remembered reflecting after small group on what behaviors her facilitator had modeled and making later efforts to put those observations into practice while facilitating her own clinical groups. Joy described her process of reflecting after each small group session and recognizing lessons that had not been apparent to her in the moment. Harry described reflecting continuously on a number of levels, including on his own position within the small group, his facilitator’s role and performance ability, and on the power and value of the experience in general.

In addition to experiencing, observing, and reflecting, many participants described a process of checking in with classmates belonging to other small groups to gauge their experiences and perceptions in comparison to their own. Harry described this consultation process as valuable in helping him to discern whether or not others were struggling with the same challenges in small group. He found that they were not and reported peers, "...telling me they're satisfied because of x, y, and z... well, I don't feel x, y, and z, because I'm experiencing this, this, and this. So, what is it that my group facilitator is not doing that's not creating this experience?" Olivia had the opposite experience and found classmates coming to her to seek whether or not she found the small group experience beneficial. She described this as an opportunity to recognize the vast differences between varying small groups and more fully appreciate her own positive experience. Elle expressed a similar sense of relief after hearing about other small group requirements which entailed more work from the group members and recalled her sudden realization that "...everyone's getting a totally different experience." Joy recalled feeling newfound empathy for group facilitators after hearing complaints from other small group members about their leaders' performance. She reported, "I was thinking, 'Well, maybe *you* should do it!'" Ultimately, participants used peer consultation to explore differences, compare notes, and, at times, validate their own perspectives on the small group experience.

#### **Theme 4: "Preparation"**

Though the identified theme of how the small group experience prepared participants as future group facilitators was not as extensively fleshed out as the other themes described in this section, it is important to include it as a topic that was addressed to at least some extent by each of the seven participants. The overall consensus regarding how much influence the small group experience had on students' preparation was that while it did not provide a fully comprehensive

training experience, it did, as Mike put it, "...get the ball rolling." Many participants noted the value of simply being able to participate in *any* group experience (Mike, Joy, Felicity), many for the first time, to begin learning and understanding the nature of group dynamics from any available perspective. Mike described "...having *an* experience..." as helpful in building confidence once he started facilitating clinical groups. Felicity seconded this assertion, reporting that the small group experience prepared her for facilitation by at least, "...taking away the 'first'", noting, "I mean, it *is* helpful to have just been *in* a group... so that when you go into, um, your first experience, it's literally not the first time for everything... you know, for your brain, just to be able to start those processes of, 'Okay, I've done this.'" Joy also recalled experiencing a sense of relief at having participated in a group when she began her first clinical group facilitation experience. Dolly relayed that the experience "...made me feel more comfortable with the whole situation of being in a group and I kind of learned what a real-life group actually is."

With regard to practical application during their small group involvement, participants reported a variety of experiences. Only Dolly, Harry, and Joy got the opportunity to practice group facilitation during their small group experience, and all reported it as positive experience in terms of allowing them to begin applying concepts learned in class. All three reported engaging in a co-facilitation process with another group member and shared that it provided a foundation for getting started as group facilitators. Dolly recalled in particular her responsibility to close the group session she facilitated, and described how the experience has stuck with her in her current role as a school counselor. Harry described his chance to co-facilitate as one of the more enjoyable and memorable opportunities he took advantage of during the small group

experience and reflected on learning about “...the power of authenticity and group process...” as a result of his facilitation experience.

In reflecting on *how* the small group experience helped to prepare participants for future group facilitation, the most common response was that it allowed group members the opportunity to experience different roles, take on different perspectives, explore clinical responsibilities, and consider professional identity. Elle described engaging in the group member experience and considering what identity she wanted to develop as a group facilitator. Mike reflected that the experience, “...helped in a small way...” by encouraging him to learn about the power of group dynamics and about his own identity as a counselor. Felicity described the practical ways in which the small group experience prepared her for future paperwork and logistical responsibilities, as well as the opportunity the small group afforded her to, “...stand in future clients’ shoes.” Olivia cited learning the value of allowing group members to provide feedback, continuously evaluating group work practices, and adjusting as necessary to best meet members’ needs. Joy described the ways in which being a group member could help her to better understand the client perspective. Harry reflected on preparation based on learning how *not* to facilitate and what practices he wanted to avoid as a future group clinician. Dolly cited the value of being prepared to recognize that real life does not always mirror what students see in training videos, noting, “The world isn’t perfect, but you gotta be able to think on your feet!”

### **Theme 5: “Missing Pieces”**

The final theme that emerged from data analysis was a sense across all seven participant interviews of a piece (or several) missing from their required small group experiences. One of the most common missing elements described by participants was hands-on practice at facilitation (Dolly, Olivia, Felicity, Harry, Joy). Though participants unanimously reported

enjoying learning about concepts such as group dynamics, stages, and methods for facilitation, the application piece of facilitation practice was resoundingly absent from the overall experience. Even those participants who did get the chance to practice co-facilitation noted that more practice would have likely been helpful in preparing them for future facilitation. When asked what might have made her experience more productive or helpful, Dolly responded, “I think it would’ve probably been nice if we’d had more, um, practice leading the group... I think it would’ve probably made me a little more comfortable starting my own group. I mean, I think it’s a good experience, but it would’ve been neat if I would’ve, instead of having a co-leader, got to do it by myself.” Harry noted that more practice would have likely been beneficial for small group members less experienced in group facilitation. Joy cited the benefit of group facilitation practice as allowing her to shift her focus and perspective from member to facilitator and suggested that all small group members would have likely benefited from the opportunity to practice in some capacity.

Those students who did not receive the opportunity to practice group facilitation in small group also supported the notion that it may have been a helpful element to include, making this theme true to some extent for all participants. A few of them mentioned practical considerations that might make facilitation practice a difficult requirement to implement, however. Elle stated that she felt the participant experience was equally beneficial as a facilitation experience would have been, but that she recognized it would have likely been helpful for some students. She and Felicity questioned how it may throw off the existing structure of the small group experience and what effect it might have on group dynamics. Mike suggested that group facilitation practice would be “...a good opportunity for those who wanted it – maybe not a requirement, since we were still learning our basic skills.” When asked, he stated that he was not sure if he would have

taken the opportunity to facilitate if it had been offered at the time. Olivia's opinion on the matter was a little more definitive. She stated that a facilitation component would be highly beneficial for students and would offer a confidence-building tool that she now wishes she had been able to utilize.

In addition to the application piece, some participants noted other elements that seemed to be missing from the experience. Although these pieces did necessarily reflect common themes, they do offer examples of elements that may be important to consider. Other missing pieces that were mentioned include: being challenged by group members and the facilitator (Harry), experiencing other small groups in some capacity for the sake of observing different facilitation styles and theoretical orientations (Joy), more of an initial explanation of the purpose of the small group experience (Olivia), a consistent sense of productivity and movement beyond the surface level (Felicity), a consistent sense of security and confidentiality broken at times by videotaping sessions for the course instructor and supervisor (Mike), a consideration of how the late-night timing of the small group experience directly after a lengthy class may affect group members' abilities to focus (Elle). Table 1 on the following page provides a visual summary of the five themes described above.

Table 1. Direct examples of each identified theme.

Identified Themes	Participant Quote Examples
Expectations	<p>-Dolly: “I didn’t <i>expect</i> that I would get to know these people on such a deep level and I thought that was really nice...”</p> <p>-Harry: “That’s what I kind of expected small group to be – us experiencing the things we were talking about!”</p> <p>-Olivia: “Nobody kind of knew what to expect...”</p>
The Emotional Experience	<p>-Mike: “It excited me, this group excited me, but I didn’t want to – I had to balance talking and... letting other people jump in too.”</p> <p>-Harry: “Um, I didn’t speak up when I was feeling, I don’t know, this level of discomfort. And... I just, um, I just didn’t, maybe I didn’t feel super safe inside of that group process.”</p> <p>-Elle: “So I guess that was probably the first time I felt like any kind of... group cohesion, as far people being like, trying to be supportive, and then not feeling so embarrassed about [crying]...”</p>
The Learning Process	<p>-Joy: “I mean, for me, mostly, it was observation and reflection...”</p> <p>-Elle: “The sheer fact that I was actually able to participate in and experience a group, made it so much better. And I think that helped all of the concepts kind of stick with me.”</p> <p>-Mike: “[It’s] one thing for me to read it, and recite it back, another thing to <i>do</i>. So, we <i>did</i>, that’s for sure.”</p>
Preparation	<p>-Felicity: “I would say, again, even with the experience I still felt underprepared...”</p> <p>-Joy: “I mean, I feel like it helped, but I don’t – I’m not sure how much. Cause there were still a lot of surprises, but I mean you can’t prepare me for every situation. That’s impossible.”</p> <p>-Mike: “I wouldn’t say it <i>completely</i> prepared me, but it got the ball rolling, for sure.”</p>
Missing Pieces	<p>-Olivia: “I think [facilitating] would be <i>very</i> beneficial... and I wish we had done that. Because I was thinking... I wanted to do it and we didn’t.”</p> <p>-Dolly: “I think it would’ve probably been nice if we’d had more, um, practice leading the group...”</p> <p>-Harry: “...if I could’ve had a small group experience where I was really challenged by my group members, where I was challenged... from my facilitator, um... I think I would’ve done, not that I would’ve done better, but I think my experience would’ve been different.”</p>

### **Key Findings**

When analyzed through the lens of Kolb's (1984) ELT, four of the themes found in this study form the basis for its key findings: "The Emotional Experience", "The Learning Process", "Preparation", and "Missing Pieces." Although the theme of "Expectations" is certainly significant in considering the overall training of counseling students on group work, it is the four themes listed above that most closely relate to Kolb's theory and best answer the research question at the heart of this study: How do counseling students experience small group participation required as part of their academic training on group work? As such, the four key findings from this study are as follows:

1. The small group membership experienced by these seven participants provided them with an overall emotional experience that influenced their learning processes.
2. The learning processes of these seven participants within the small group setting consisted primarily of experience, observation, and reflection.
3. The seven participants in this study left their small group experiences feeling partially prepared to function as future group facilitators.
4. These seven study participants felt that there were key elements missing from their small group experiences; namely, the opportunity to apply their learning in a practical manner.

### **Summary of Findings**

This chapter detailed the findings of my content analysis of seven transcribed interviews with counseling graduates who participated in required experiential small groups as part of a Group Dynamics and Methods course. I presented these findings in the form of five primary themes that emerged during data analysis, including: "Expectations", "The Emotional Experience", "The Learning Process", "Preparation", and "Missing Pieces." These themes



represent commonalities identified across participant interviews and therefore describe not only individual participant experiences, but also the collective experience of these seven counseling graduates. Upon drafting my initial analysis, I sent the above findings to all seven participants, inviting them to provide feedback and/or clarify if they felt I had misunderstood or misrepresented their reflections on the small group experience. None of the participants chose to provide critical feedback. Using Kolb's (1984) ELT as a theoretical lens for further analysis, I also summarized the key findings of this study. In the next and final chapter, I offer my interpretation of these findings in relation to Kolb's (1984) ELT and propose several resulting implications and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion**

### **Chapter Introduction**

In this chapter, I provide a final overview of the present study, including an account of its limitations. Then, I discuss key findings as they relate to both the original research question and to this study's theoretical framework. Next, I suggest potential implications for counselor educators and program accreditation bodies in considering how to best train counseling students as future group facilitators. Finally, I propose several ideas for related future research.

### **Overview of Study**

The present study used a qualitative content analysis methodology to explore and describe the experiences of counseling graduates who participated in experiential small groups as part of the Group Dynamics and Methods course required for their counseling degrees. Given the dearth of research focused on *how* experiential methods influence the training of counseling students as future group facilitators, I interviewed seven participants to gain a better understanding of their individual and collective learning experiences. As such, the research question that guided this study was: How do counseling students experience small group participation required as part of their academic training on group work? My analysis of interview transcripts identified five distinct themes related to participants' small group experiences and the influence this experiential requirement had on their training as future group facilitators. After reviewing the limitations associated with this study, I will discuss its four key findings in particular relation to the research question and Kolb's (1984) ELT.

### **Limitations of Study**

Because the limitations inherent in any study influence its discussion of findings, it is important to address them as transparently as possible, which I attempt to do here. Readers

should keep these limitations in mind while reviewing this discussion and considering the interpretation of and use of my findings. Limitations associated with this study are related particularly to its content analysis methodology, the lack of generalizability of qualitative findings, and my inability to control for participants' unique individual experiences.

Researchers noted several limitations inherent in the content analysis approach, including challenges related to narrowing one's focus and managing large quantities of collected data (Anderson, 2010; Creswell, 2013, Kondracki et al., 2002), as well as minimizing researcher bias during the data analysis process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Although I was unable to eliminate these limitations altogether, I managed them to the best of my ability by bracketing and identifying my own personal biases before interviewing participants, making careful, conscientious efforts to review and interpret collected data as purely as possible, and taking measures to ensure I represented findings as accurately as I could. I utilized a thorough and tedious process of coding and thematizing to condense data and heighten my sense of understanding during analysis, and checked in with participants both during and post-interview to clarify any responses about which I was unsure or where I sensed my own bias coming into play. It is important to note that by using Kolb's (1984) ELT as the theoretical lens for this study, I was potentially biased toward identifying codes and themes that fit securely within the chosen framework. To minimize this bias in particular, I was cautious to report only those thematic findings that I felt could be justified by the amount of focus and attention given by participants, and I used participants' own words as frequently as possible to represent the data in a way that was pure and objective.

Another limitation of this particular study is its lack of generalizability, which presents a challenge to many qualitative researchers. Due to the nature of qualitative design, which

typically hones in on the specific experiences of a small group of participants, it is difficult to extend findings to any population beyond that which is involved in each individual study.

Although generalization may at times seem plausible, the only way to further support and expand upon qualitative findings is to replicate or extend a study in some capacity. Because the seven participants in this study completed their Group Dynamics and Methods course during the same semester, in the same counseling program, at the same institution, I am able to consider their data only as a representation of their individual and collective experiences and cannot generalize my findings to any broader population of students or counselors. To address this limitation, I am careful in my discussion of findings to clarify that my interpretations come solely from analyzing these seven interviews and cannot be applied to outside populations. Additionally, I note that my findings and interpretations reflect *only* the experiences of my participants, therefore limiting the scope of any implications I might suggest.

Finally, the third primary limitation of this study revolves around my lack of control concerning participants' unique individual experiences. Eligibility for study participation included having academically passed the Group Dynamics and Methods course, successful matriculation from the counseling program in question within the past three years, and the ability to participate in a face-to-face interview. This leaves open the possibility for many other contributing factors to have influenced participants' reflections and subsequent responses, including for example, their current professional responsibilities, other group encounters which may have impacted their perception of the small group experience, and the unique intricacies inherent in the fact that different participants belonged to different small groups, and thereby may have had radically different experiences. I addressed this limitation by identifying

commonalities as I analyzed collected data and focusing on the thematic links that emerged across participant interviews.

The limitations described in this chapter undoubtedly influence the discussion of findings that follows and it is important that readers consider my interpretations and related implications with these limitations in mind. Although my hope is that counselor educators and accreditation representative may consider these findings valuable, it is imperative that they review the following discussion with an open mind and critical eye. In the next section, I discuss the key findings of this study as they relate to the original research question.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

The present study's four key findings involve the influence of emotion of counseling students' experiential learning of group work, the existing inclusion of experience, observation, and reflection within the training process, the reportedly partial preparation of counseling students as future group facilitators through the use of experiential small groups, and the application element missing from the group work training experience. When analyzed using a theoretical framework of Kolb's (1984) ELT, these key findings begin to answer questions associated with *how* experiential small groups influence counseling students' learning processes and how effectively this training method prepares students as future group facilitators. By revisiting some of the research highlighted in Chapter Two, I discuss these key findings in the context of adding to the existing body of literature on the group work training of counseling students. I support all four key findings with examples taken directly from participant interviews and provide a critical alternative perspective for each, as well.

**Key Finding 1: Emotional Influence on Experiential Learning of Group Work**

The first key finding in this study is that the required small groups in which these participants engaged, provided them with an overall emotional experience that influenced their learning of counseling group work. This finding in particular begins to answer at least in part the present study's research question of *how* experiential small groups influence counseling students' learning of group work. Participants described extensively the ways in which *feelings* influenced their abilities to engage with, observe, and reflect upon the small group experience in a meaningful way.

Several participants described initial feelings of nervousness, discomfort, and hesitancy that dissipated as time went on and they settled into the group process. Mike likened the sense of not knowing what to expect to a client's first experience in clinical group setting. Participants also shared a range of emotions experienced in preparation for and following small group sessions, as well as the impact of interpersonal emotional processes witnessed and experienced within the small group setting. Joy recalled one example in which a group member felt unprotected by her peers and by the group facilitator. Joy's response was to consider how she would feel as both the member and facilitator in that situation and she reported being able to look back on that experience and empathize with both parties when she later encountered her own challenging group situations. These examples suggest that emotions played a significant part in the experiential learning process associated with small group participation for these former students, and influenced to some extent the ways in which they made meaning of the experience.

Kolb's (1984) ELT describes learning as a process of transforming experience and, as described in his CE stage of the learning cycle associated with "feeling", it is often through emotion that individuals are able to begin that process. Other researchers also noted the

inextricable link between feelings and learning (Imai, 2010; Sunderland, 2014; Ytreberg & Aars, 2015). In this study, experiencing elements that made participants feel and remember specific, identifiable emotions served at times as the catalyst for how they processed and transformed their small group experiences into lasting, applicable clinical knowledge. One example of this process is Olivia's re-telling of an activity during her small group experience that made her feel angry and unheard in the small group setting. She recalled vividly her feelings about the experience during our interview and described the lasting impression the incident made on her empathy for upset clients and dedication to allowing them time to process their feelings in-the-moment. This provides just one example of many experiences described by participants of how small group membership elicited a range of emotional reactions and learning breakthroughs.

Given that Kolb (1984) defined learning as an active, continuous, developmental process, it is only natural that emotions would play a part in an experiential academic component designed to be transformative in nature. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle (Figure 1) highlights four stages, the first of which is to have a Concrete Experience (CE) involving *feeling*. In reviewing Kolb's Learning Styles (Figure 2), one can see that those involved in CEs are focused on feeling and observing as they prepare to transition to other stages of the cycle. Considering this theme through the lens of ELT suggests that emotions would have naturally played a significant role in the small group learning experiences of these participants, given their developmental stage and general location within the learning spiral. The nature of their reflections on the feelings associated with small group participation suggests that this course requirement may have been instrumental in providing a key setting/context more conducive to experiencing and exploring emotions than the larger classroom setting. This key finding also falls directly in line with Gibbons et al.'s (2013) assertion that counselor training is both a

personally and professionally developmental process, and as such, a range of emotions may arise and at times influence the interpersonal and intrapersonal work required of counselors-in-training. This finding supports previous research on the merits of personal development groups used in counselor training to provide emotional experiences related to learning, self-reflection, and the development of empathy (Furr & Barret, 2000; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010).

### **Key Finding 2: Experience, Observation, and Reflection within Group Work Training**

The second key finding of this study is that existing opportunities for experience, observation, and reflection within the small group setting constituted the bulk of the learning experience for these seven participants. Participants cited these activities as most influential in their learning of group dynamics, noting the power of all three practices at different stages in the small group process. Mike cited experience as a powerful personal learning tool, reporting, "...there's no better experience than a hands-on experience with groups stuff, and trying to learn how to be in a group, trying to understand how someone [else] would approach that." Felicity referred to observation as "...helpful piece to see someone do it, and do it well." Joy spoke extensively about the value in being provided with ample opportunities for reflection. She recalled an instance of intense group member interaction and described her process for making sense of it as, "...[being] there and witnessing it and hearing it, but then like later, I processed it more and then every time I thought about it, it was like something different...".

This suggests that for these participants, the processes of encountering group dynamics firsthand, observing the behaviors and interactions of group members and facilitators, and reflecting on experiences provided the basis for transforming experience into knowledge. This begins to provide insight with regard to the research question by providing participant-voiced reports of the ways in which learning occurred for them and potentially for others. This key



finding also supports and expands upon previous research that demonstrated experiential learning as an effective method for training counseling students on group work (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; Kottler & Englar-Carlson, 2010; Lennie, 2007; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

This finding also aligns most closely with Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning. As described in the Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) stages of his learning cycle, learners actively engaged in the learning process move through stages of feeling or experiencing, watching or observing, and thinking or reflecting. The participants in this study reported engaging in three of the four stages depicted in the visual model within their small group experiences. This suggests that the existing experiential small group model used by the counseling program described in this study may provide a useful and nearly comprehensive (i.e. three of four learning cycle stages identified) group work training experience for counseling students. While participants across all seven interviews referred repeatedly to elements of feeling, observing, and reflecting, none mentioned the act of doing, or as Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle defines it, Active Experimentation (AE). This begs the question of why the fourth stage of Kolb's (1984) model failed to enter the experiences of these participants, a question which is further addressed in the final key finding described in this section. One possible explanation for participants' failure to mention this stage of the learning spiral is that they did not conceptualize activities designed to foster application as such; another might be that group facilitators failed to offer as many application-friendly opportunities as they did experience-, observation-, and reflection-friendly opportunities for learning.

### **Key Finding 3: Partial Preparation of Counseling Students as Future Group Facilitators**

The seven participants in this study reported overwhelmingly that although they did learn from their required small group experiences, they ultimately still felt unprepared to perform as facilitators once the opportunity for practical application arose. Felicity proposed an interesting reason for this lack of full preparation, noting, “I think we get in this mentality as counselors, ‘I need to be in the client’s shoes, I need to be in the client’s shoes’ and we miss what it takes to be in the *counselor’s* shoes.” Joy described the sense of partial preparedness at the heart of this finding, reporting of the small group experience, “I mean, I feel like it helped, but I don’t – I’m not sure how much.” Participants’ responses across the board suggested that although the small group experience was valuable in its own right, it left them lacking confidence and/or perceived readiness for the role of counseling group facilitator.

Returning again to the theoretical framework established by Kolb (1984), there is a clear gap in the learning process that may have contributed to the resounding lack of preparation voiced by these study participants. Because their small group experiences stopped short of what Kolb (1984) referred to as Active Experimentation (AE), or *doing*, participants potentially missed opportunities to practice the skills, methods, and interventions associated with the group facilitator role that they were learning about in class, and experiencing through observation and reflection in their small groups. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) noted the value in offering trainees the opportunity to imitate facilitator behaviors through practice, and it is apparent that these participants were not afforded this recommended opportunity, at least within the small group setting. Whereas role-play, demonstration, and other in-class experiential methods may provide limited opportunities for practice (Guth & McDonnell, 2004; McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Osborn et al., 2003), these participants’ repeated declarations of partial preparation suggest a

need for incorporating more practical facilitation-oriented opportunities into the small group experience.

One possible explanation for the lack of application-based opportunities was voiced by Mike, who asserted in consideration of his own preparedness, “I don’t think that’s what [small group’s] purpose was either – to train me. It was to give us an experience... to get to know ourselves more, to... learn about the power of group dynamics... group experiences.” Another potential explanation for the lack of comprehensive preparation was suggested by a couple of participants and revolved around the time constraints of the semester-long course and the logistical difficulties associated with figuring out how to give counseling students initial membership experience, as well as adequate facilitation experience.

#### **Key Finding 4: Missing Application in Group Work Training**

The final key finding of the present study is one that culminates from the previous three – the application element of the learning process, as described in the models associated with both Kolb’s (1984) ELT and Bloom’s Cognitive Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) is a desired element that is quite clearly missing from the experiential small group training approach. Almost all of the participants spoke of their personal desire for a chance to apply their learning in some practical capacity before being thrust into the “real world” of professional practice, and some even recognized a need for more application-based training among their peers. Dolly’s one recommendation for improving the small group experience was increased opportunity for facilitation practice and Harry suggested it as a definite need for those students with no prior experience. These blatant reflections during the interview process provided evidence, at the very least, for student-identified deficiencies in existing training methods and suggested a need for re-evaluating current training guidelines.

Kolb's (1984) ELT asserts that learners traveling through the cycle of feeling, observing, reflecting, and applying may enter the cycle at any stage and move at any pace that works effectively for them, but that they must attend to and find a balance between all four stages to maximize the learning process. Active Experimentation (AE) provides the stage at which learners fully transform their experiences into lasting knowledge, and when the opportunity to capitalize on the *doing* is missing, it is unlikely that learners will fully understand and be able to effectively apply group work concepts in the professional arena. For hands-on converging and accommodating learners, who rely on opportunities for execution to fully process new knowledge, a missing link in this realm could make it very difficult to satisfactorily comprehend and retain concepts otherwise experienced, observed, and reflected upon.

In light of the fact that CACREP (2009) currently requires only minimal group work experience and fails to specify the need for group facilitation experience outside of internship, it is important for counselor educators and accreditation bodies alike to consider this finding in particular. Although the same logistical considerations described in relation to other key findings enter again into play, here, Felicity offered a potentially viable curricular solution based on creating a group facilitation-specific practicum experience for credit outside of the Group Dynamics and Methods course. Although CACREP (2009) does require within its current internship standards "...experience leading groups..." (p. 15), this is the only guideline offered. The lack of specificity provided by this national accrediting body suggests that this training deficiency may exist in counseling programs beyond the one involved in this study. At the very least, this key finding highlights a significant student-voiced gap in the group work training currently provided at one university and suggests the need for further investigation.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

In this section, I discussed this study's four key findings, including: the influence of emotion on counseling students' experiential learning of group work, the existing inclusion of experience, observation, and reflection with the training process, the partial preparation of counseling students as future group facilitators as achieved through experiential small groups, and the application element ultimately missing from the overall group work training experience. By discussing the participant responses at the root of these findings through the lens of Kolb's (1984) ELT, I highlighted the significance of these concepts in evaluating how experiential small groups influence and prepare counseling students as future group facilitators. My overall findings and highlighted key aspects provide counselor educators and accreditation organizations valuable student-voiced evidence as to the effectiveness of currently required and utilized group work training methods.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators and Accreditation Bodies**

Although this study's findings are not generalizable to populations outside of the seven participants I interviewed, their reflections are indicative of a group work training experience that could benefit from further exploration and evaluation. In this section, I review implications stemming from the key findings described above. My hope is that these implications may inform the attention to group work training paid by accreditation bodies such as a CACREP, curriculum design by group work educators within the counseling profession, and those individuals who facilitate the experiential small groups required of counseling students in a number of programs.

First, it would behoove counseling program accreditation representatives to consider that these findings come from currently practicing (except for one, Felicity) former students who, for the purposes of this study, reflected back on their fairly recent group work training experiences.

The finalized and recently released new CACREP standards (to be implemented in 2016) depict little adjustment to the group work training requirements for accredited programs. Those individuals who design and evaluate current training guidelines would benefit from reviewing studies in which students and new professionals provide insight, as well as review routinely the perceived and reported effectiveness of training guidelines as they stand. One implication of this study is that if accreditation bodies found a way to incorporate more application-based training requirements, particularly pertaining to group work, counseling graduates may feel more prepared to fulfill group-oriented duties as new professionals. Were this to occur, counselor education faculty would need to be prepared to make adjustments and revisions to curriculum expectations in order to meet new accreditation requirements.

An implication for counselor educators tasked with meeting accreditation standards is to analyze current training practices and solicit formal and informal feedback from former and current students about their effectiveness. Those counselor educators who instruct students on group work might consider the use of experiential small groups as an adjunct to classroom instruction and may want to refer to Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle in designing curriculum that attends to the needs of various learners and allows students to transition fully through the cycle with regard to group facilitation. Findings demonstrated that students both desired and appreciated distinct connections between classroom learning and small group experiences, as described in Felicity's suggestion that training programs provide hands-on facilitation opportunities through the establishment of a group work practicum requirement. As such, it may be helpful for counselor educators in curricular planning stages to consider how to make those links more apparent and tangible.

Finally, for counselor educators, adjunct professors, clinicians, or doctoral students facilitating experiential small groups, it is advisable to reflect on the reported expectations of student members and consider how working to meet or choosing not to meet those expectations may influence the learning process in a helpful or harmful fashion. In addition, considering beforehand the ways in which group membership and potential facilitation opportunities may influence individual and collective emotional processes and provide comprehensive experiences may be helpful. Many participants also shared appreciation for their facilitators' ability to balance between being structured and flexible – this could constitute a helpful reminder in planning small group experiences effectively to allow room for flexibility as needed.

### **Role of Researcher**

My role in conducting this study was one that I found highly rewarding at times, and exceedingly challenging at others. To move from doctoral student to doctoral candidate meant, for me, embracing an entirely new level of self-discipline and I struggled throughout the research process to battle old habits and familiar patterns of behavior and assimilate to admittedly more effective methods of practice. For the first time in my life, I found relief in accepting temporary defeat at times and finding other areas on which to focus my attention until my mindset was ready to tackle whatever challenges plagued me in the moment.

During the data collection phase in particular, I discovered a method that worked well for me, which entailed using my natural skill set in significantly different ways to accomplish the task before me. As a counselor, I like to think I am a good listener; as a qualitative researcher, I found that being a good listener means something entirely different. For to me to engage fully in the interview process and really begin to develop a solid understanding of participants' experiences, I not only had to listen to what was being said, but listen also for what was not

being said, all while maintaining control of my own bias-driven urges to push interviews in one direction or another. As a counselor, I find it impossible to take notes and focus simultaneously on what the client is saying; as a researcher, I found it impossible to consider any approach *but* taking notes while listening to help me channel my focus.

I continued this practice throughout data analysis, listening to audio recordings as I transcribed and considering again what content was there, what content was not, and what all of it meant when considered together. I found it necessary at times to momentarily disregard the big picture in order to make sense of individual pieces, and only in doing so was I able to eventually make sense of the whole. Conversely, there were times I found myself obsessing over individual elements at times and needing to step back and get a broader sense of the puzzle I was attempting to put together. Ultimately, this resulted in my learning the importance of *balance* in attempting any major research endeavor; finding, yet again, evidence of my continuous personal, professional, and academic struggle to maintain discipline and equilibrium.

Due to a keen self-awareness and a great deal of prior reflection, the issues with which I struggled throughout this process came of little surprise to me. They did, however, shed new confirmatory light on suspected personal deficiencies and require me to forcibly make the transition from student to scholar. My saving grace was my ability to write my way through challenges, even though doing so at times required a re-aligning of priorities and a shifting of focus, and I learned to trust my instinct regarding the need to do so. My confidence in my ability to express myself clearly propelled me through the challenges associated with feeling stuck at times, or daunted by certain tasks, or incapable of being a “real researcher” and I became more engaged in and excited by the process as I recognized my own slow, but sure, development. I relied heavily on others’ dissertations as a model for formatting and structuring my own and I



found myself asking for help more than ever before and feeling some measure of comfort in doing so that I have never experienced. In learning to discipline myself, trust my instincts, and seek assistance as needed, I believe I transformed from a novice researcher to a practicing one and discovered potential and ability that I have long denied could be a successful part of my professional repertoire.

Conducting this study constituted an entirely new experience for me in innumerable ways and I hope it provided participants and will provide readers a new understanding or perspective on research in some way as well. The following insights will ideally provide others with some understanding of what I learned throughout this research process and how my perspective on research changed as a result. These insights include: learning the value of transcribing one's own data, recognizing the significance of exploring, disclosing, and managing one's personal biases, and describing revisions to my approach should I conduct this study again.

First, I admit that I was initially reluctant to transcribe my own interviews, due primarily to the tedious and time-consuming nature of the transcription process. As is common among graduate-level students, however, I found myself without the financial capability to hire someone to complete the task for me; thus, I was forced to transcribe all seven interviews on my own. Without access to a transcription machine, this proved to be an even more daunting task. As predicted, immersing myself in the transcription process proved to be excruciatingly tedious and perhaps one of the most time-consuming elements of completing this dissertation - but what a blessing in disguise it turned out to be. Transcribing each interview allowed me to immerse myself in the data on an entirely different level than I would have been able to had I hired a transcriptionist. Additionally, it forced me not only to replay the content of each interview multiple times, but also to pay particular attention to tone, inflection, and other minor cues I may

have otherwise missed or forgotten. This made for a smooth transition between data collection and analysis and gave me some measure of understanding before the coding process even began. I engaged with and became familiar with the data in a deeper manner than perhaps I would have without transcribing and I feel as though transcription helped me to truly invest in the topic of this study and begin considering the collective experiences of my participants.

A second insight I gained from engaging in this research process was the value and necessity of identifying and addressing my own personal biases about the topic at hand. Initially, I chose and researched group work training based solely on my interest in group facilitation and was skeptical of any real bias I had, other than thinking that group work is an important function of the counseling profession. During the bracketing process with my Chair, however, I experienced a significant breakthrough related to *why* I truly was invested in the topic and how strongly my own training experiences as a master's-level student had resonated with me and left me feeling dissatisfied. Ultimately, this clarification of personal bias stuck with me throughout the entirety of the process and allowed me to “check myself” during interviews, transcription, data analysis, interpretation, and the writing of this manuscript. I found myself able to investigate my own perspective more thoroughly and transparently as a result of the bracketing session with my Chair and this heightened awareness allowed me to manage my biases much more closely than ever in any other research project.

Finally, if given the opportunity to re-do this study, there are a number of things I would change about my approach. On a personal note, I would allow myself space to balance elements of the process – finding time to breathe and step away when necessary, and disciplining myself to push forward more effectively when necessary. I would also allow myself more time to move through the process at a reasonable pace rather than forcing myself into challenging time

constraints. The dissertation process in its entirety is overwhelming and I would certainly afford it more respect up front than I did throughout the duration of this project. With regard to actual procedure, I would organize my codes more efficiently so that I could better keep up with my own thoughts and considerations, rather than using the slightly haphazard system I devised for this project. I would also put more effort into analyzing my findings utilizing Kolb's quite complex Experiential Learning Theory. I feel as if time constraints only allowed me to scratch the surface of making important theoretical connections and I suspect there are many more significant links and implications that will emerge as more time passes, I reflect, and am able to devote more effort to this aspect of data analysis.

Ultimately, my perspectives on the research process and on myself as a researcher have changed quite radically throughout this process. I am pleased with the progress I made in transitioning from student to scholar and, quite unexpectedly, I feel as though I may have actually made a minor, but valuable, contribution to this field of research. I have learned many things along the way, both about conducting research and about myself, and my hope is that this study's participants and readers will have all learned something in the end as well.

### **Recommended Areas for Future Research**

This study represents an initial exploration of the experiences of counseling students who participated in small groups as part of their academic training as future group facilitators. In this section I propose suggestions for future research related to this topic, including studies that involve differing participant populations and those that qualitatively explore the use of varying experiential learning methods. I conclude this section by recommending studies that further evaluate the group training guidelines currently established by CACREP and ASGW. Though my recommendations are not comprehensive in covering all future research possibilities, I do

hope that my suggestions provide a foundation for further investigating methods for effectively training counseling students as future group facilitators.

### **Recommendation 1: Expanding Participant Population**

Future research may benefit from expanding the participant population to include and represent graduates from other counseling programs, students more recently enrolled in a Group Dynamics and Methods course, and counseling professionals who have practiced for longer than one year. Manipulating the population under a qualitative design would still limit the generalizability of findings; however, it would provide a more extensive understanding of additional small group experiences. Of particular interest would be interviewing students who either more recently or much longer ago completed the Group Dynamics and Methods course at the same university involved in this study, which would provide a broader range of similarly designed experiences for comparison. Including questions pertaining to group training in graduate exit interviews and/or surveying alumni might offer one feasible method for collecting such data. It would be interesting to consider how length of professional practice might influence reflections, or conversely, how still enrolled student status might affect participant perspectives. It may also be interesting to control for various demographic factors in exploring how culture influences the small group experiences of individual students.

### **Recommendation 2: Exploring the Use of Other Experiential Methods**

Another recommendation for future research is to replicate the present study to investigate student experiences with other experiential group work training methods, such as role-play, in-class demonstration, simulation, etc. Qualitatively exploring student insights and the reported effectiveness of other experiential learning methods may prove valuable in determining whether experiential learning constitutes the most effective approach for preparing

counseling students to be successful group facilitators. It may also be helpful to conduct a similar study focused on a counseling program that already provides its students with clear group facilitation opportunities to explore their levels of satisfaction with group work training experiences. Maintaining the participant voice would be a critical recommendation for studies of this nature, as doing so would provide an interesting comparison with studies exploring the use of experiential small groups as a training tool.

### **Recommendation 3: Evaluating Current Training Guidelines of CACREP and ASGW**

A final recommendation would be to investigate counselor educator, student, and counseling professional perceptions of current group work training standards and guidelines established by bodies such as CACREP and ASGW. A quantitative survey design may best suit this type of inquiry, as it would likely garner significantly more responses and would allow for numerically calculating the demonstrated significance of findings. This sort of study could constitute a routine evaluation of sorts for CACREP and ASGW, and may provide valuable feedback for representatives who work periodically to revise and strengthen training recommendations.

### **Summary of Discussion**

In this chapter, I provided a brief overview of the present study, including its limitations. I then discussed the four key findings of this study, using Kolb's (1984) ELT to frame my interpretations. Next, I described several implications for accreditation representatives, counselor educators, and small group facilitators, including reviewing and evaluating current training guidelines, incorporating opportunities for practical application, soliciting trainee feedback in designing curriculum, and considering student expectations, emotions, and desires in planning for comprehensive and effective small group experiences. Finally, I proposed several

suggestions for future research on the topic of group work training for counseling students. These suggestions entailed conducting similar studies with different participant populations, conducting studies focused on other experiential learning methods used in group work training, and designing studies that further evaluate the most recently published group work training guidelines set forth by governing bodies such as CACREP and ASGW. Overall, this study provided valuable, student-voiced insight into the use of experiential small groups as one method for training counseling students on group work and facilitation. Though this study represents only an introductory venture into this field of inquiry, I hope that future studies will expand upon my findings, and that counselor educators and accreditation representatives will utilize the research to help them in designing increasingly effective group work training recommendations to benefit counselors and clients alike.

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## Appendices



## Appendix A: IRB Approval Outcome Letter



Office of Research & Engagement  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

1534 White Ave.  
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529  
865-974-7697  
fax 865-974-7400

June 3, 2015

Brittany Lynn Pollard  
UTK - Educational Psychology & Counseling

**Re: UTK IRB-15-02304-XP**

**Study Title: A Qualitative Exploration of the Influence of Required Experiential Small Group Participation on the Training of Counseling Students as Group Facilitators**

Dear Ms. Pollard:

The Administrative Section of the UTK Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your application for the above referenced project. It determined that your application is eligible for expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1), categories (6) and (7). The IRB has reviewed these materials and determined that they do comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects. Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval by the IRB of your application version 1.2, as submitted. Approval of this study will be valid from June 3, 2015 to June 2, 2016.

In the event that subjects are to be recruited using solicitation materials, such as brochures, posters, web-based advertisements, etc., these materials must receive prior approval of the IRB. Any revisions in the approved application must also be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Finally, re-approval of your project is required by the IRB in accord with the conditions specified above. You may not continue the research study beyond the time or other limits specified unless you obtain prior written approval of the IRB.

Sincerely,

Colleen P. Gilrane, PhD  
Chair  
UTK Institutional Review Board

## Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Hello,

I hope this email finds you well. I am contacting you in support of Brittany Pollard's dissertation research study, which is related to your prior enrollment as a student in my Group Dynamics and Methods course at the University of Tennessee. Below, you will find an invitation to participate in the study and information for contacting Brittany if you are interested. Please contact Brittany *directly* at the email provided below to discuss your interest in participating. Thank you for your consideration of this opportunity.

Joel F. Diambra, Ed.D., LPC-MHSP, NCC  
Associate Professor, Counselor Education  
Associate Department Head & Director of Graduate Studies  
Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling  
448 Claxton Complex, 1122 Volunteer Blvd.  
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Knoxville, TN 37996-3452  
865 974-8774 office  
865 974-0135 fax  
[jdiambra@utk.edu](mailto:jdiambra@utk.edu)

### Invitation to Participate:

Hello! My purpose in contacting you is to invite you to participate in a research study for the completion of my dissertation requirement as a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at the University of Tennessee. The purpose of this study is to explore, describe, and understand the experiences of former counseling students who participated in required experiential small groups as part of their graduate training. I am particularly interested in how those experiences influenced their abilities to perform as counseling group facilitators.

Participation in this study will entail joining me for a face-to-face individual interview for approximately one hour. The interview will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Your confidentiality will be maintained through procedures described in the attached informed consent statement. You will have the opportunity to review my initial data analysis and final published findings.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may decline to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from this study prior to the completion of data collection, your data will be destroyed.

If you have further questions related to this study or are willing to participate, please review the attached informed consent form and email me directly at [bpollar3@vols.utk.edu](mailto:bpollar3@vols.utk.edu) to indicate your interest. I will contact you to respond to any questions asked and to arrange an interview date and time. I will bring the attached informed consent to our interview session and ask for your signed consent before we proceed.

Thank you in advance for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Brittany Pollard, M.Ed.  
bpollar3@vols.utk.edu  
(517) 402-1520

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent Statement**

### **INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

A Qualitative Exploration of the Influence of Required Experiential Small Group Participation on the Training of Counseling Students as Group Facilitators

#### **INTRODUCTION**

You are invited to participate in a research study for the completion of my dissertation requirement as a doctoral candidate in Counselor Education at the University of Tennessee.

The purpose of this study is to explore, describe, and understand the experiences of former counseling students who participated in required experiential small groups as part of their graduate training. I am particularly interested in how those experiences influenced their abilities to perform as counseling group facilitators.

#### **INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY**

You will participate in a face-to-face interview for approximately one hour. This interview will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for the purpose of analysis. Following your interview, the audio recording will be immediately downloaded onto my personal computer and saved as a secure file to which only I have access. The audio recording will then be erased from my recording device. Following my initial analysis of your interview transcript, I will send you my findings to check that I have accurately understood, interpreted, and described your shared experiences. At the completion of this study, you will be provided information on how to access the resulting dissertation, if you so choose. Additionally, following today's interview, I may contact you with further questions or for clarification purposes, with your signed permission below.

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS**

There is minimal risk associated with this study. The only potential risk identified includes any stress that might naturally arise from reflecting on your previous experiences. This risk will be minimized by identifying its potential prior to your participation and by allowing you to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Additionally, should you encounter any participation-related distress and require a local counseling referral, I will connect you to the Tennessee Licensed Professional Counselors' Online Network.

#### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

Your participation in this study will help me to explore, describe, and understand your experiences in a required experiential small group as part of your counseling training and its influence on your ability to perform as a counseling group facilitator. These findings will contribute to the existing body of knowledge related to these topics. There is also potential societal benefit associated with this study, should the findings provide valuable insight to

counselor educators and accreditation bodies. The more that counselor training improves, the more effective services counseling professionals will be able to provide. The better results clients may then experience could provide a benefit to society at large.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The information in the study records will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms assigned to each participant and the removal of any identifying information during interview transcription. Data will be stored securely in password-protected files on a password-protected computer and will be made available only to persons conducting this study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to this study.

## **EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT**

The University of Tennessee does not "automatically" reimburse subjects for medical claims or other compensation. If physical injury is suffered in the course of research, or for more information, please notify the investigator in charge, Brittany Pollard, at (517) 402-1520.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions at any time about this study or its procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study), you may contact the researcher, Brittany Pollard, in Claxton Complex 438 or at (517) 402-1520 or bpollar3@vols.utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-7697.

## **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be destroyed.

---

## **CONSENT**

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Vita**

Brittany Pollard was born in DuQuoin, Illinois on July 16, 1984. She earned a dual Bachelor of Arts degree in Magazine Journalism and Sociology from Syracuse University and a Master of Education in Mental Health Counseling from Lincoln Memorial University. Brittany's professional background includes experiences providing instruction and supervision within higher education, coordinating a mentorship program for grieving children, providing clinical services to high-risk and HIV+ clients, and working with incarcerated populations and survivors of domestic violence. She has co-authored several peer-reviewed journal articles, contributed to two textbooks, and presented at local, state, regional, and national conferences, as well as served actively in multiple roles on the executive board for her local chapter of Chi Sigma Iota. Brittany will graduate with a Ph.D. in Counselor Education and begin serving as Assistant Professor of Counseling at Indiana University of Pennsylvania in Indiana, PA in August 2015.